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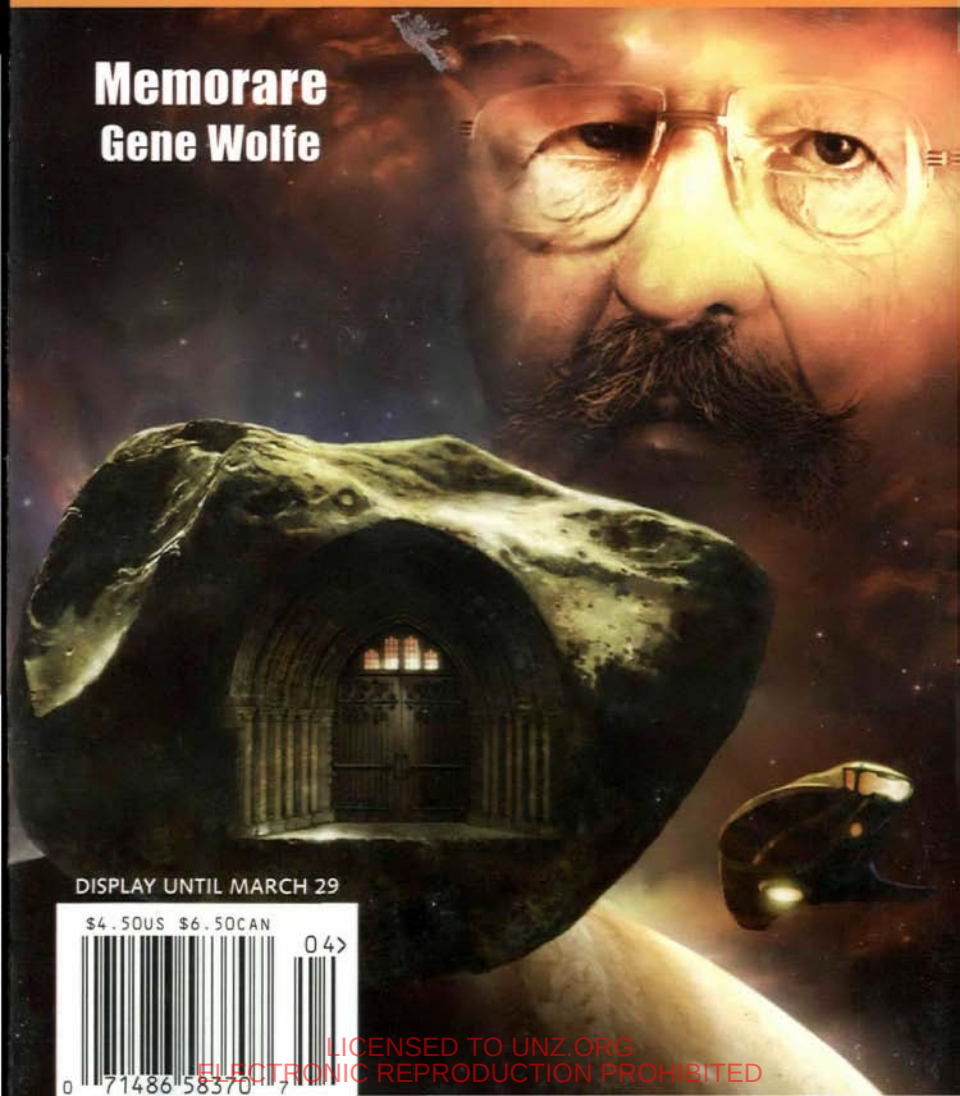

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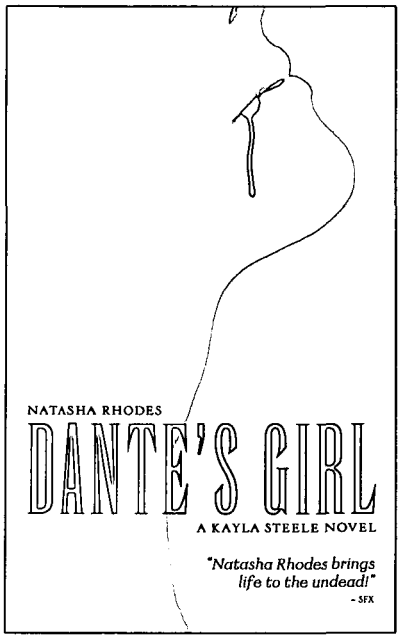

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THE MAGAZINE OF
Fantasy & Science Fiction
April • 58th Year of Publication

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The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction (ISSN 1095-8258), Volume 112, No. 4, Whole No. 660, April 2007. Published monthly except for a combined October/November issue by Spilogale, Inc. at $4.50 per copy. Annual subscription $50.99; $62.99 outside of the U.S. Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy & Science Fiction, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030. Publication office, 105 Leonard St., Jersey City, NJ 07307. Periodical postage paid at Hoboken, NJ 07030, and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A.
Copyright © 2007 by Spilogale, Inc. All rights reserved.
Distributed by Curtis Circulation Co., 730 River Rd. New Milford, NJ 07646.
GENERAL AND EDITORIAL OFFICE: PO BOX 3447, HOBOKEN, NJ 07030
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How to Read Gene Wolfe

Neil Gaiman

LOOK AT Gene: a genial smile (the one they named for him), pixie-twinkle in his eyes, a reassuring mustache. Listen to that chuckle. Do not be lulled. He holds all the cards: he has five aces in his hand, and several more up his sleeve.

I once read him an account of a baffling murder, committed ninety years ago. "Oh," he said, "well, that's obvious," and proceeded offhandedly to offer a simple and likely explanation for both the murder and the clues the police were at a loss to explain. He has an engineer's mind that takes things apart to see how they work and then puts them back together.

I have known Gene for almost twenty-five years. (I was, I just realized, with a certain amount of alarm, only twenty-two when I first met Gene and Rosemary in Birmingham, England; I am forty-six now.) Knowing Gene Wolfe has made the last twenty-five years better and richer and more interesting than they would have been otherwise.

Before I knew him, I thought of Gene Wolfe as a ferocious intellect, vast and cool and serious, who created books and stories that were of genre but never limited by it. An explorer, who set out for uncharted territory and brought back maps, and if he said "Here There Be Dragons," by God, you knew that was where the dragons were.

And that is all true, of course. It may be more true than the embodied Wolfe I met twenty-five years ago, and have come to know with enormous pleasure ever since: a man of politeness and kindness and knowledge; a lover of fine conversation, erudite and informative, blessed with a puckish sense of humor and an infectious chuckle.

I cannot tell you how to meet Gene Wolfe. I can, however, suggest a few ways to read his work. These are useful tips, like suggesting you take a blanket, a flashlight, and some candy when planning to

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drive a long way in the cold, and should not be taken lightly. I hope they are of some use to you. There are nine of them. Nine is a good number.

How to read Gene Wolfe:

1) Trust the text implicitly. The answers are in there.

2) Do not trust the text farther than you can throw it, if that far. It's tricksy and desperate stuff, and it may go off in your hand at any time.

3) Reread. It's better the second time. It will be even better the third time. And anyway, the books will subtly reshape themselves while you are away from them. *Peace* really was a gentle Midwestern memoir the first time I read it. It only became a horror novel on the second or the third reading.

4) There are wolves in there, prowling behind the words. Sometimes they come out in the pages. Sometimes they wait until you close the book. The musky wolf-smell can sometimes be masked by the aromatic scent of rosemary. Understand, these are not today-wolves, slinking grayly in packs through deserted places. These are the dire-wolves of old, huge and solitary wolves that could stand their ground against grizzlies.

5) Reading Gene Wolfe is dangerous work. It's a knife-throwing act, and like all good knife-throwing acts, you may lose fingers, toes, earlobes or eyes in the process. Gene doesn't mind. Gene is throwing the knives.

6) Make yourself comfortable. Pour a pot of tea. Hang up a DO NOT DISTURB Sign. Start at Page One.

7) There are two kinds of clever writer. The ones that point out how clever they are, and the ones who see no need to point out how clever they are. Gene Wolfe is of the second kind, and the intelligence is less important than the tale. He is not smart to make you feel stupid. He is smart to make you smart as well.

8) He was there. He saw it happen. He knows whose reflection they saw in the mirror that night.

9) Be willing to learn.

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Fans of the American reality TV show "Survivor" might be amused to know that the winner this past season listed The Book of the New Sun among his favorite books. But this information should not surprise any of our readers. Reading Gene Wolfe is a basic survival skill for life in our times.

Memorare

By Gene Wolfe

THE MOMENT MARCH Wildspring spotted the corpses, he launched himself across the shadowy mortuary chamber. He had aimed for the first, but with suit jets wide open he missed it and caught the third, flattening himself against it and rolling over with it so that it lay upon him.

Bullets would have gotten him; but this was a serrated blade pivoting from a crevice in the wall. Had it hit, it would have shredded his suit somewhere near the waist.

He would have suffocated before he froze. The thought failed to comfort him as he huddled under the freeze-dried corpse and strove not to look into its eyes.

How much had his digicorder gotten? He wanted to rub his jaw, but was frustrated by his helmet. Not enough, surely. He would have to make a dummy good enough to fool the mechanism, return with it, and....

Or use one of these corpses.

"Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known...."

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The half-recalled words came slowly, limping.

"That anyone who fled to your protection, implored your help, or sought your intercession, was left unaided."

There was more, but he had forgotten it. He sighed, cleared his throat, and touched the sound switch. "These memorials can be dangerous, like this one. As I've told you, this isn't the big one. The big one we call Number Nineteen is an asteroid ten times the diameter of this, which means it could have a thousand times the interior volume. Frankly, I'm scared of it. We may save it for last."

He had a harsh, unpleasant speaking voice. He knew it; but it was the only voice he had, and the software that might have smoothed and sweetened it cost more than he could afford. Back on his hopper, he would edit what he had said into a script for Kit. She had a voice....

"There are at least five sects and cults whose members believe the deceased will be served though all eternity by those who lose their lives at his or her memorial. Some claim to be offshoots of major faiths. Some are openly satanic. We haven't seen enough to identify the bunch that built this one, and frankly I doubt we will."

If the show sold, if it made one hell of a lot of money, it might — it just might — be possible to buy or build a robotic probe. Of course, if that probe were destroyed....

He began wiggling out from under the corpse and sliding under the next.

Nothing happened.

"*Memorare....*" He had read the Latin twice, perhaps. It was as lost as the English now. No, more lost.

The blade was set to rupture the suit of anyone who came in. That much was plain. What about going out?

When he had the first corpse steady and vertical, a gentle shove sent it across the chamber in a position that looked practically lifelike.

Nothing. No blade, no reaction of any kind as far as he could see.

Possibly, the system (whatever it was) had detected the imposture. He tried to make the second corpse more lifelike even than the first.

Still nothing.

What if a corpse appeared to be entering? A few determined pulls on his lifeline got him plenty of slack. Hooking it to the third corpse, he

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held the thin orange line with one hand while he launched the corpse with the other. When it had left the memorial, a gentle tug brought it in again.

The blade flashed from its crevice, savaged the corpse's already-ruined suit, and flung the corpse toward him.

"You've got a new servant," March muttered, "whoever you were." Playing it safe, he went out the way he had come in — fast and high.

Outside, he switched on his mike. "We just saw how dangerous a small percentage of these memorials are, a danger that poisons all the rest, both for mourners and for harmless tourists who might like to visit them. A program for identifying and destroying the few dangerous ones is badly needed."

Propelled by his suit jets, he circled the memorial, getting a little more footage he would probably never use. His digicorder had room for more images than he would ever need. Those millions upon millions of images were the one thing with which he could be generous, even profligate.

"Someone perished here," he told the mike, "far beyond the orbit of Mars. Other someones, employees or followers, family or friends, built his memorial — and built it as a trap, so that their revered dead might be served.... Where? In the spirit world? In Paradise? Nirvana? Heaven?

"Or Hell. Hell is possible, too."

Flowing letters, beautiful and alien, danced upon the curving walls. Arabic, perhaps, or Sanskrit. It would be well, March thought, to show enough of it that people would recognize it and stay away. For the present, the corpses floating outside it might be warning enough. His digicorder zoomed in before he switched it off and returned to his scarred olive-drab hopper.

There was an Ethermail from Kit when he woke. He washed, shaved, and dressed before bringing her onto his screen.

"Hi there, Windy! Gettin' lonely out there in the graveyard?"

She was being jaunty, but even a jaunty Kit could make his palms sweat.

"Well, listen up. Have I got a deal for you! You get me to em-cee this terminal travelogue you're makin'. As an added bonus, you get a gal-pal

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of mine. Her name's Robin Redd, and she's a sound tech who can double in makeup.

"What's more, we come free! Absolutely free, Windy, unless you can peddle your turkey. In which case we'll expect a tiny little small cut. And residuals.

"So whadda you say? Gimme the nod quick, 'cause Bad Bill's pushin' me to come back. Corner office, park my hopper on the roof with the big boys, and the money ain't hopscotch 'n' hairballs either. So lemme know."

Abruptly, the jauntiness vanished. "Either way, you've got to be quick, Windy. Word is that Pubnet's shooting something similar out around Mars."

He said, "Reply," and took a deep breath. It was always hard to breathe when he tried to talk to Kit. Yes, even when she was three hundred million miles away.

"Kit, darling, you know how much I'd love to have you out here with me, even if it were just one day. I want you and I want to make you a superstar. You know that, too."

He paused, wishing he dared cough. "I couldn't help noticing that you didn't mention what Bad Bill wanted you *for*. Knowing you and knowing that there isn't a smarter woman in the business, I know you've found out. It's his pet cooking show again, isn't it? He wouldn't give you a corner office for those kiddy shows, or I don't think he would.

"So get yourself one of the new semitransparents, okay? 'Vaults in the Void' is just about roughed out, everybody in the world is going to want to see it by the time we're finished with it, and nobody who sees it will ever forget you, darling.

"God knows I won't."

He moved his mouse and the screen went dark, leaving only the faint reflection of an ugly middle-aged man with a crooked nose and a lantern jaw.

The on-board had found three interesting blips strung out toward the orbit of Saturn, but Jupiter — specifically the mini-solar system surrounding it — was closer, and every hop took its toll of his wallet. He put the Jovian moons on screen and began speaking, just winging it so as to have something to work over for Kit later.

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"Mightiest of all the worlds, Jupiter has drawn travelers ever since hoppers became a consumer necessity. When the first satellite was launched in nineteen fifty-seven, the men and women who put it into orbit could hardly have dreamed that Luna and Mars would be popular tourist destinations in less than a hundred years. Nor could the pioneers who built the first hotels and resorts there have anticipated that as soon as translunar travel became popular, travelers seeking more exotic locales would come here to the monarch's court.

"You've got to throw a lot of money in the hopper. That's for sure. But that only makes it that much more attractive to those who've got that money and want to flaunt it. It's dangerous, too — transmissions from tourists whose icoms go abruptly silent make that only too clear, and every edition of the *Solar Traveler's Guide* strives to make the danger a little plainer.

"Unfortunately, the striving doesn't seem to do much good. People keep coming, alone or in company. Sometimes they even bring children. Every year, five, or ten, or twenty don't make it back. Do all of them get memorials in space, *memoria in aeterna*? No, of course not. But many do, and such memorials are becoming more popular all the time. Some are simple stones. Others — well, we'll be showing you a few. In an age in which the hope of a life after death gutters like a candle burned too long, in a century that has seen Arlington National Cemetery bulldozed to make room for more government offices, the desire to be remembered leaps up with a bright new flame.

"If not remembered, at least not totally forgotten. We wish it for our loved ones, too. We'd like some spark of them to remain until the sun grows dim. And who can blame us?"

Now to make the hop. Perhaps he would learn, soon, just what had happened to that poor girl who had tried, for so short a time, to raise her sweetheart and his friends.

The first memorial he checked was a beautiful little thing. Someone with taste had taken a design intended for the desert and reworked it for space, with no up and no down, a lonely little mission shrine not too near Jupiter that reached up for God in every direction.

The bright flames inside belonged to votive candles, candles that

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burned in vacuum, apparently because their wax had been mixed with a chemical that liberated oxygen when heated. They made a glorious ring of white wax and fire around the shrine, burning in nothingness with fat little spherical flames.

"A shrine sacred to the memory of Alberto Villaseñor, Edita Villaseñor, and Simplicia Hernandez," he told his digicorder, "placed here, deep in space, by the children and grandchildren of the Villaseñors and the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Simplicia Hernandez."

How many thousands of hours had Al Villaseñor labored under a broiling sun before he could buy the hopper that had carried him, with his wife and the very elderly woman who had probably been his mother-in-law, to a death somewhere near Jupiter? Their 3Ds were in the shrine; and the mark of those hours, of that sun, was on Al's face.

Turning off the audio, March murmured a prayer for all three.

Back on his hopper, clicking Ethermail got him Kit's blue eyes and bright smile. "What's this 'semitransparent' bull, Windy? Transparent's only a couple thou more. I've got a good one, and I've been posing for the mirror. No picky-picky underclothes underneath. Wait till you see the pix! You're gonna love 'em.

"But Windy, you didn't say a thing about my li'l pal Robin Redd. Can she come, too? I gotta bring her, Windy, or not come myself. She's on the lam from a ex who beats hell out of her. She's got an Order of Protection and all that crud, which he doesn't give a rat's ass about. I know he doesn't, Windy. I was with her on Wednesday when he kicked her door down. Scout's honor! I grabbed the carving knife and screamed my cute li'l head off.

"Windy, honeybear, I can't leave Robin high and dry. I won't! Not after what we went through Wednesday night. So can she come? It's me, Windy. This is Kit, and I'm begging."

March sighed and leaned back in the control chair, collecting his thoughts before he spoke.

"Gee, Kit, here I thought you were longing for the sight of my manly profile. Okay, I've got it now. Bring your friend. I trust she's too well-mannered to push back the curtain when she hears funny noises from a bunk. Trust me, I'll wash the sheets this time.

"But Kit, you're going to have to wear something under that see-through

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suit. Get used to the idea if you want me to show you below the neck."

AS MARCH EDGED his hopper just a little nearer Number Nineteen, he turned up a new memorial, an asteroid circling Jupiter well outside the orbit of Sinope. Earlier he had thought it *only* a rock, a piece of pocked debris too small to hold even the chips knocked loose by meteorites.

Now he could see the entrance of the tomb. It was closed, though most such entrances gaped open, and square, though most were rough circles. As he zoomed in on the tumbling asteroid, the neat lettering before that entrance grew clear: PLEASE WIPE YOUR FEET. This was one he wanted.

His own suit, orange and strictly opaque, was starting to show signs of wear. Nothing dangerous yet, but it would have to be watched. A military suit....

Well, a military suit wore pretty much like armor. A military suit got rid of built-up heat and kept the wearer warm no matter what. The wearer could relieve himself right there in his suit, and eat and drink whenever eating and drinking seemed necessary or advisable. Three kinds of lights, a score of tools, and half a dozen weapons were built into the suit; so was a mini computer with enough capacity for a whole lot of AI. That little on-board could and would offer warnings and advice. It would watch the wearer's back and even stand guard while he slept.

A soldier in a military suit could reach up into his helmet and pick his nose, or even take a suitless comrade — wounded or otherwise — into the suit with him.

A military suit....

Cost more than March Wildspring had been worth before his divorce, and twenty times more than he was worth at the moment. His own space suit, this dull orange suit that was beginning to show wear, provided propulsion, communication, and breathable air for four hours plus. Little more beyond a fishbowl helmet that would darken when hit with a whole lot of ultraviolet light — Twentieth Century tech, and he was lucky to have even that. Shrugging, he closed his suit and buckled on his utility belt.

Spaceboots over the feet of the suit were not strictly necessary, but

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were (as March reminded himself) a damned good idea. Suits tore. Cheap civilian suits tore pretty easily, and tore most often at the feet. Small permanent magnets in the boots would keep him on the sheet-metal body of his hopper without holding him there so tightly that he would have trouble kicking off.

With the second boot strapped tight, he hooked his lifeline to his belt and put on his helmet. On Earth, his suit weighed fifty-seven pounds. Here it weighed exactly nothing; even so, his irritated struggles against its frequently pigheaded mass provided a good deal of useful exercise. People tended to get soft in space.

Kit would be another source of salutary exercise, he reflected, if things went as well as he hoped.

The airlock was big enough for one person in a pinch, if that one person was mercifully free of claustrophobia. March shut the inner door and spun the wheel, listening to his precious air being pumped back into the hopper, to its whispering, whimpering departure. Then to silence.

Fifteen seconds passed. Half a minute, and the outer door swung back. He kicked off from the inner door and turned on the suit's main jet. Steering jets and seat-of-the-pants flying kept him on course for the asteroid into which some unlucky tourist's tomb had been carved, and enabled him to match the asteroid's rotation.

The inscribed welcome mat before the door was, on closer inspection, wrought iron. His boots stuck to the iron nicely. Was he to knock? He did, but there was no response. Presumably there was no atmosphere inside the tomb, but it would have been possible — even easy — for a mike to pick up sound waves transmitted through the stone walls. Checking a third time to make certain his digicorder was running, he searched the doorframe for a bell button and found one.

The wood-grained steel door opened at once, apparently held by a bald, pleasant-looking man of about sixty. "Come in," the bald man said. He wore an old white shirt and faded jeans supported by red suspenders. "It was darned nice of you to come way out here to see me, son. If you'll just come inside and sit down, we can have a good chat."

March switched on his speaker. "I'll be happy to, sir. I know you're really a holographic projection, but it's very hard not to treat you as living person. So I'll come in and chat, and thank you for your hospitality."

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The bald man nodded, still smiling. "You're right, son. I'm dead, and I'd like to tell you about it. About my life and how I came to die. I'd like to, but if you don't want to hear it, I can't keep you. Will you stay and make a poor old dead guy happy?"

"I certainly will," March said, "and half the world with me." He indicated his digicorder.

"Why that's wonderful! Sit down. Sit down, please. I hate to keep my guests standing."

It was just possible that there were knives that would slash his suit concealed in the fluffy pillows of the sofa behind the long coffee table. March chose what appeared to be a high-backed walnut rocker instead, tying its cord so that he floated a few inches above its seat.

The bald man dropped into an easy chair that showed signs of long use. "I'd make you some iced tea if you could drink it, but I know you can't. It doesn't seem right not to offer a guest something, though. I've got some little boxes of candy you could take back to your hopper. Maybe give to the missus, if she's in there? You like one?"

March shook his head. "She's not, sir. It's very kind of you, but what I'd really like is to hear about you. Won't you tell us?"

"Happy to, son. Glad to recite my little adventures, at home and out here in space. Frank Welton's my name, and I was born in Carbon Hill, Ohio, U.S.A., one of a pair of twin boys. Probably you never heard of Carbon Hill, it's just a little place, but that's where it was. I was a pretty good ball player, so I played ball for eight years after high school. See my picture? The kid with the glove and bat?" The bald man pointed, and March swung his digicorder to get it.

"That was taken when I played for the Saint Louis Cardinals. I played left field, mostly, but I could play all three outfield positions and I generally hit pretty close to three hundred. The money was good, and I meant to stay in baseball as long as I could. That turned out to be eight seasons, but for that last season I was a pinch hitter, mostly. An outfielder has to have a good strong throwing arm, and my shoulder blew out on me."

March said, "I'm sorry to hear that, sir."

"Well, I got out of baseball and went home to Carbon Hill. A friend of my dad's was in the sand and gravel business in a small way. He was getting on and wanted a younger partner with some money they could use

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to expand the business. I threw in with him, and when he died I bought his widow out. Pretty soon I was making more in sand and gravel than I ever had playing ball. I got married...." The bald man took out a handkerchief and dabbed at his eyes.

March cleared his throat. "If this is too painful for you, sir, I'll go."

"You stay, son." The bald man swallowed audibly and wiped his nose. "There's things I got to tell you. Only I got to thinking about Fran. She died, and I didn't have the heart anymore. Business is like baseball, son. If you got nothing but heart, you can still win on heart. Not all the time, mind, but now and then. That's what they say and it's the truth. But if you don't have heart, you're done for."

March nodded. "I understand you, believe me."

"That's good. I turned the business over to our kids. That's Johnny, Jerry, and Joanie, and they're the ones who built this memorial for me. They owed me a lot, and they still do. But they paid off a little part of what they owed with this. Like it?"

"One of the best I've seen, sir, and I've seen quite a few."

"That's good. I bought me a hopper when I retired. I told everybody I wanted to see Mars because of all the sand and gravel they had there. I thought it was true, but what I really wanted was to get away from Earth. Maybe you know how that is."

March nodded.

"So I did. Spent a little time on Mars and a few days on the moon, then I thought I'd have a look at Ganymede, Callisto, Titan, and so forth. The big satellites of the outer worlds, in other words. People don't realize how many there are, or how big they are, either.

"It was Io that did me in. Not the li'l gal herself, but trying to get there. Oh, I knew all about old Jupiter. How far out his atmosphere goes, and the radio bursts. All that stuff. What I hadn't figured on was just what all the gravity meant. Just how quick it grabs you, and how quick a hopper heats up when it hits ol' Jupiter's atmosphere. I guess I've 'bout talked your ears off now."

March shook his head. "If you've got more to say, sir, I'll listen."

"Then I'll say this. My dad was a good man and a hard worker, but he was a day laborer all his life, and he died at fifty-four. Go back a few generations, and my folks were slaves. I had a better life than my dad did,

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and one hell of a lot better life than they did. I'd like a prayer or two, son, and I'd like to be remembered. But I'm not complaining. I got a fair shake, and I had a lot of luck. Want to see how I looked when I was dead, son?"

"I don't understand how that's possible, sir." March hesitated before adding, "You were pulled down to Jupiter, and your hopper must have been burned away completely before it hit the planetary surface."

"Well, son, I can show you just the same. This is pretty slick, so have a look." Leaning forward the bald man touched the top of the coffee table, and it became as transparent as glass.

A dead man lay just below the transparent surface, his eyes shut and his hands folded. His white shirt and casual jacket were well-tailored and looked expensive. After studying his features, March said, "That's you all right, sir. Computer modeling?"

"Nope." The bald man had turned serious. "It's an actual tridee, son, taken at the funeral. That's my twin brother, Hank. He died forty-six days after I did. That happens a lot with twins. One gets killed and the other dies. Identical twins I mean. Which is what we were. Nobody knows why it happens but it does. Hank turned in for the night like usual. Barbara went to get him up in the morning, and he was dead. You want to be dead, son?"

March shook his head. "No, sir. I don't."

"Then you take a lesson from me and watch out for that ol' Jupiter."

Back in his hopper, his on-board signaled Ethermail. He touched the keyboard, and Kit's arresting eyes and perfect complexion filled the screen. "Hi, Windy! If you don't want us, say so. One more should get us there, so this's your last chance.

"But first, stop worrying about what I'm going to have on under the suit. I am going to wear a bra. Guaranteed. Haven't you seen what zero-g does with boobs the size of mine? I have. They go all over, and believe me it's not a pretty sight. So I've got this wonderful little pink bra. You're gonna love it! The saleswoman got out a needle and pulled the whole, entire thing through the eye."

Kit had a charming laugh, and she used it. "Don't look at me like that, Windy. Put down that fatal eyebrow. Okay, it was a big needle like you might use on denim or leather. So it had a big eye. But she pulled it

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through, exactly like I said. I'll show it to you — by golly and geewhillikers, I'll model it for you. So if you don't want us you've gotta be quick."

March clicked REPLY. "Kit, darling, you know I want you more than life itself. Please hurry! Now don't get mad, but I'm a little bit curious. Why didn't I see your pal Robin Redd in the background. Is she really that ugly?"

He had hardly resumed his search for memorials when his on-board signaled a fresh Ethermail.

"She's in the can, Windy. That's all. She'll be out in a minute. Not bad-looking, either, if you dig redheads with bruised faces. So if you're all hot to fantasize, go right ahead. Just don't try to make 'em real, 'cause you know damn well there ain't space enough in your hopper for three bare-ass bodies playin' games.

"Speakin' of space, I got a li'l surprise. Have a look out your driver's-side window. Wanna couple?"

It was Kit's hopper, as he knew it would be, a new one gleaming with chrome and unscarred maroon paint and roughly the size of one of the compact pre-fabs older people still called mobile homes. Twice the size of his own hopper, in other words.

Suiting up again, he grabbed his line launcher and went out onto the hull.

A tiny figure emerged from the big maroon hopper, and the icom in his helmet buzzed and clicked. "You got a launcher, Windy? I didn't bring mine, but I can go back in and get one."

"Right here." He aimed his launcher, activated its laser guide, and launched, the solid-fuel rocket trailing a slender but strong Kevlar line.

"You got us, Windy. Want me to pull?"

March started his winch. "We'll just get it tangled. I'll reel you in."

"You gotta wench winch. Ever think of that?"

"Saying things like that cost you 'Building People for Kids.'"

"I didn't care. I'd already done the parts I liked. Got anything to eat in that tin can?"

"Self heats. Stuff like that."

"We've got that beat hands-down. Robin can't cook worth a damn. I, upon the other well-washed hand, am an internationally famous cheffettej. One who — "

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March said, "There's no such word and you know it."

"There is now. One who, I was saying, knows there's nothing for getting the ol' pencil sharp like a real, authentic Caribbean pepper pot. Be ready in an hour or so, but if you'd like to come over now for a long-time-no-see kiss...."

With their hoppers grappled, it was not necessary to turn on his suit jets to go from his own to hers. He kicked off, somersaulted in space, and landed feet-first next to her airlock.

"Nicely done, Windy," she said as he was taking off his helmet and just beginning to appreciate her flowery perfume. The long-time-no-see kiss followed, and lasted a good two minutes. When they separated, she added, "If you weren't wearing all that machinery, I think I might've raped you."

He leered. "Men aren't supposed to make jokes about rape. You told me that — "

"I'm not a man. You failed to notice."

"Therefore, madam, I will say quite seriously that if I had not been swaddled in all this gear, I believe I might have ravished you."

She had put her finger to her lips; he lowered his voice as he said, "You escaped by merest chance."

"Rape's a sensitive topic with Robin," Kit whispered. "I shouldn't have shot off my mouth. Only when a man does it, it's ten times worse. I think her ex raped her. Maybe a couple times."

"I see."

"Okay, she'll cramp our style verbally. Not in bed. I'll see to that."

"So will I," March said. "Marry me, Kit. I mean it. How the hell do you kneel without gravity?"

"You meant it last time. I know that."

"And I mean it this time."

"I turned you down." Kit's face was somber. "Did I say why?"

"No. Just that you weren't ready."

"Then I'll say it now. I love you to pieces, but I've got a career and they print your name on the toilet paper in the executive washroom. You think I'm kidding?"

"Damn right I do." March opened his suit. "You've never set foot in the executive washroom."

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"Wrong. When I was talking to Bad Bill about the cooking show I had to powder my nose, and he loaned me his key. It's on the paper."

March scowled, then chuckled. "And you used it."

It got him the sidelong glance and sly smile he loved. "I'm taking the Fifth, Windy."

"It wasn't a question. Speaking of washrooms, when are we going to see what's-her-name?"

"Robin. How would I know? She's been in there forever. Do you understand why I said no, Windy? You don't have to agree with it. Just understand it."

He shrugged. "Does it mean you'll be wearing a fake mustache when you narrate for me?"

"That's not the same thing, and you know it. I'm not with the network right now. Not officially. My contract's run out. It'll probably be renewed, but it might not be. Nobody's going to raise hell because I took a stop-gap job narrating a documentary. Besides...." Her sudden silence betrayed the thought.

"Besides," March rasped, "'Vaults in the Void' may never be broadcast. Go ahead and say it. You'll be saying something I've thought a thousand times."

"There's not much market for documentaries, Windy," Kit was trying to make her voice kind, something she was not particularly good at. "Yours is sure to be a complete downer, even with me in it acting all respectful. So if — "

A latch clicked five steps away, and one of the flimsy doors opened and — very softly — shut. He turned.

And froze.

"Hello, Marchy." The woman with her hand on the latch was a head shorter than Kit. The small face beneath the mop of blazing red hair looked pinched and white. One eye was bruised and swollen nearly shut; there was a second bruise on the cheek below it.

"Sue." March did not realize that he had spoken aloud until he heard his own voice.

"That isn't my name now."

Shrugging was difficult, but he managed it. "You've sued me so often that I don't see how I can call you anything else."

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She drew herself up. "My name is Robin Redd."

"So I've heard."

"Hold it!" Kit edged (most enjoyably) around March to stand between them. "You owe me. Both of you do. Windy, I bought this hopper and came way the hell out here into God-forsaken outermost space just because you needed me. Tell me that's not right, and I'll head back home as soon as you clear the airlock."

"It's right," March said.

"Robin, you had to get away. I'd seen what Jim could do, and I stepped up like a Girl Scout. I never ran your card or asked a favor. I said why don't you come with me, I'll be glad to have the company. If you say that's not how it was, I'm hustling you back to Earth and shoving you out. Wasn't that how it was?"

Robin nodded.

"Okay. It's a mess. Even I, good-hearted dumb li'l Kit, can see that. But I don't know what kind of mess I've made, and I'm going to raise holy hell till you two fill me in. You know each other. How?"

March sighed. "We made the mess, Kit. Sue here did, and I did. Not you."

Robin whispered, "He's my ex, Kit."

"Jim?" Kit goggled at her. "I saw Jim. It was Wednesday night."

"Not Jim. Oh, God! I hate this!"

March said, "It's been years since the final decree, Kit, and the proceedings dragged on for a couple of years before that. I had abused her — verbally. I had said things that injured her delicate feelings. Things that were quoted in court, mostly inaccurately and always out of context. I had persecuted her — "

"Don't! Just don't! Don't say those things."

"Why not?" March was grim. "You said them to a judge."

"I had to!"

Kit threw up her hands. "Hold it. Stop right there. I'm making a new rule. You don't talk to each other. Each of you talks only to me."

She glared at March, then turned to Robin. "How many times have you been married?"

"T-twice." Her eyes were overflowing, their tears detached by minute motions of her head to float in the air of the hopper, tiny spheres of purest crystal.

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"Windy was your first husband?"

Studying her without hearing her, March was besieged by memories. How beautiful she had been in the days when she still smiled, the days when her hair was long, soft, and brown. In his mind's eye, she was poised on the high board, poised for a second or two that had somehow become forever, poised above the clear blue water of some hotel's swimming pool.

"Windy? Did you hear me?" It was Kit.

He shook his head. "I was remembering, I'm afraid. Thinking how it used to be before it went bad."

Robin shouted, "Before you stopped paying attention!"

"Shut up!" Kit snapped. "Windy, she said you never hit her, but you abused her verbally and psychologically. Threats and put-downs. All that stuff. True or false?"

"True," March said.

"Is that all you've got to say?"

He nodded.

"Did you ever love her?"

He felt as though his feet had been kicked from under him. "Oh, my God!" He groped for words. "I was crazy about her, Kit. Sometimes she wouldn't speak to me for weeks and it just about killed me. She left me over and over. I'd come home from work, and instead of being there spoiling for a fight she'd be gone. She'd live with some boyfriend or other for a few days, maybe a week, and then — "

"Jim!" Robin cocked her head, her smile a challenge. "It was always Jim, Marchy."

"Shut up!" Kit turned to glare at her.

"That isn't what she said. Do we have to talk about this?"

Kit studied him. "You look like you've lost a quart of blood."

"I feel like it, too."

"My pepper pot ought to help. And I've made Cuban bread. That's easy. You ever eat stew out here?"

He shook his head.

"Me neither. I've got it simmering in hopsacks. Those clear plastic thingies. That's why you don't smell it."

"Sure." It was wonderful to speak of something else. Of anything else. "I've got some, too."

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"So I figure we can drink the liquid, and there'll be little chunks of crayfish and pork and so forth in there too. When it's gone, we can open the hopsacks and eat the solids."

"Should work."

"Do you still love her, Windy?"

He shook his head.

KIT IN HER TRANSPARENT SUIT was simply incredible, lush curves that changed and changed again as the suit flexed, but in that light were never more than half seen. He shot her from the waist up, not quite always, knowing it would keep five hundred million men watching, waiting, and wondering.

"Hi. It's me again, Kit Carlsen. When I do a cooking show, I tell you — sometimes — about the chef who developed a recipe, or the person the dish was named after. Peaches Melba for Nellie Melba the opera singer. You know. Well, today we're going to visit the tomb of a lady who was her town's best, and best known, cook. I plan to ask her about her cooking as well as her life and death. You may think it's tasteless, but March Wildspring and I think you'll find it interesting if you'll just stick with us. March is our producer, so what he says goes."

With a wave and a beckoning smile, Kit entered the tomb. March grinned. After a moment he followed her, watching her image in the digicorder screen more closely than Kit herself.

That's me, there. The woman in the gray dress on the red chair.

The voice was without even the semblance of a living speaker, the picture calm, serious, and motionless.

My name was Sarah-Jane Applefield. I was sixty-three at the time of my demise. My parents were McAlister Rodney Applefield and Elizabeth Warren Weyerhaeuser. I bore three fine children in my time, Clara, Sheryl, and Charles. All were much loved. Would you like to hear about my early life?

"No, Sarah." Kit's voice was soft, coaxing. "We'd like to hear about your cooking. It made you famous all over Southton. Can you tell our audience something about that?"

Certainly. Would you like recipes, or the secrets of good cooking?

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Kit smiled in her plastic bubble. "Your secrets, please."

I call them secrets because so few women seem to know them. They're secrets I tell freely to anyone, but they stay secret just the same. Do you cook?

"I do," Kit said. "I cook a lot, and so do a lot of busy women and men in our audience."

Good. The first is to release the inner self. We're all a little bit psychic, but we've been taught to pretend we're not. Let that go. Feel the dish. Sense what it feels. In the storybook, Alice talks to the food, and the food talks back to her. I read it to my children. Lewis Carroll wrote it, and he was an old bachelor. He cooked for himself, you see, so he knew.

Kit smiled again. "I need to read that book, and I will."

The second is to use your nose. Cooking would be difficult for a woman who was blind, but if she learned, she would be a better cook than a seeing woman who would not use her nose. Food may look very nice when it's really quite awful, but food that smells good is good, just about always.

The third is to taste. Spices lose their flavor. Two pieces of beef may be from different animals, even though both are beef. There are breeds of cattle just like there are breeds of cats, or one animal may be old and the next young. If you buy your beef at the store you have no way of telling. What it comes down to is that recipes can't be exact. The cook must taste, and taste again.

"That's very wise, I'm sure."

It is. Your name is Kit. Your husband told me when he was here before.

"He's not my husband." Kit's smile was warm. "But close enough."

If you were wise yourself, Kit, you would ask me what I should tell you. Whether it concerns food or not.

Kit glanced at March for guidance, and he nodded.

"Then I do, please. What is it I ought to ask? Pretend I did."

There is nothing close enough to marriage, Kit. I bore three children to the man who stands behind me in my picture. We were never wed. As time wears on, that will grow easier and easier for the man, Kit, and harder and harder for you. Look closely at my picture, and you'll see I wear a ring.

March zoomed in on it.

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I bought that ring for myself, Kit, in a little shop that sold old jewelry. He begged me to take it off once, when we were going to bed. I did, and while we slept he hid it.

Kit looked stricken, but her voice remained smoothly professional. "I'm glad for your sake, Ms. Applefield, that he didn't keep it."

Don't you see? He would've had to give it to me if he had — would've had to give it back to me. Make the gesture he would never make.

"I've got it." Kit shook her head as if a blow had left her dizzy.

I like you. If I didn't, I wouldn't have spoken to you as I did just now. This will be easier for you to hear, but you must not discount it for that reason. There is another flying grave, like my own but larger than my own. It's on the other side of Jupiter today.

"One you think we ought to visit?" March sensed that Kit was breathing normally again. "Can you tell us what's there?"

I can't. Your man asked the same question. That's why I'm mentioning it now. I can look outside this grave. Did you know?

"No, Ms. Applefield, I certainly didn't."

I can. Hoppers park at that grave sometimes. I see them. People — live people like you — go inside. Pay attention now, Kit. They don't come out again, and pretty soon their hoppers drift away.

Kit was doing deep-space aerobics, throwing herself from floor to ceiling and from ceiling to floor, her lush body enveloped in a fine mist of sweat that her hopper's air system stripped away only sluggishly. "I say we gotta go in," she gasped. "Round-file that sweet old lady giving us her warning? Over my dead body."

"If you go in," Robin said, "I might go in it, too — only I wish you wouldn't."

"I'm going." Kit grunted. "If Windy won't go, I'll go in by myself. You can shoot me."

Watching her, March thought of all the things he would do — or try to — if Robin were not present. Aloud he said, "You'd better stop. You're wearing yourself out."

"Just landed a little wrong and hit my knee. I do a hundred of these." Kit sprang from the floor, twisting like a gymnast in air that smelled of shampoo. "I've been counting to myself. This's eighty-seven."

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"Then I'll count the rest for you. Eighty-eight. Eighty-nine. Ninety...."

"You're the only friend I've got," Robin told Kit. "The only good friend. If you die, it's be just me and Jim, and he'll kill me."

"Ninety-two. Kit, doesn't that tell you something about your little pal here? She's thirty-five, and she's got exactly one good friend. You. One good friend, and a second husband she thinks may kill her."

"Thirty-one, dammit!"

Kit snatched at breath. "How many?"

"Ninety-six. And I know how old Sue is. She's eight years younger than I am, and her birthday's October thirty-first. That ought to tell you something, too. Ninety-nine." He watched Kit throw herself, with obvious effort, back to the crimson carpet. "One hundred."

She straightened up, and Robin handed her a towel. "Thanks for giving me an honest count, Windy. I kind of thought you'd cheat."

He nodded. "That's what Robin thought, too. She had me followed for a couple months."

"Did you?"

He shook his head.

Robin threw a pepper mill at him. "You were too smart for them!" Missing his head by at least a foot, it slammed against the wall.

March's eyes had never left Kit. "I was under the impression that Sue and I weren't speaking. Apparently I was wrong. I, however, am not speaking to her. It may spare your hopper a few scars."

"She can throw my stuff at me," Kit told him. "Robin, you're a guest in this hopper. Windy's another guest in my hopper. I asked him to dinner. If you two want to rip open old wounds, I can't stop you. No violence, though. I mean real violence, like throwing stuff. Or hitting. Do it again, and you go out."

"Into *his* hopper?" Robin's contempt was palpable. "I'd rather die!"

"I doubt that he'd let you in. I'll just get you suited up and shove you out the airlock. Tourists come to Jupiter pretty often. Somebody will probably pick you up before your air runs out."

March sighed. "You want me to say I'd take her in. And if I don't...."

"I'll think a lot less of you, Windy."

"All right, I will. I only hope I won't have to. If I do, I'll probably kill her before I can get her back to terra firma."

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"I'm not from there, smart-ass." Robin cocked her head. "Terror whatever you said."

Kit giggled as she joined Robin at the tiny table. "I'm not going to touch that straight line. Don't you touch it either, Windy."

She tied the soft cord that would keep her from floating out of her chair. "Bulbs are hot. Windy, get over here and sit down. I know you always like coffee with your meals. How about you, Robin? Coffee? Tea?"

"Tea, please." Robin's voice was one breath above a whisper.

"Here you go. And here's your coffee, Windy. Now before you start gobbling my *Truite Farcie aux Epinards*, we've got to talk seriously about the next shoot. Do you remember when I said I'd go into that damned mausoleum or whatever it is alone if you wouldn't come with me? I meant every word of it."

March sat. "You may change your mind when you've had time to think it over. I hope you will."

Kit looked as grim as a pleasant blonde can look. "I change my mind before I've told anybody. Never after. If you won't go in, I'm going in alone tomorrow."

So close to March that their elbows touched, Robin raised a beverage bulb to her lips and put it down. "Do either of you actually know where this awful place is?" Her perfume, musky and hinting of cinnamon, crept into his nostrils.

Kit shook her head. "I'll find it. The dead lady can probably tell me, just to start with."

"I call it Number Nineteen," March told her. "I've known about it awhile, but I haven't gone inside."

"Then I won't have to ask her — I'll get it out of you. Shameless prostitution, right? Are you going in, too? Yes or no."

"Then it's yes. I'll go in there with you on one condition."

Robin said, "I'd go in with Kit if she was going in there alone. Not if you'll be with us."

"That would have sounded better," Kit told her, "if you'd said it before Windy said he'd go. We call that bad timing in show biz." She turned to March. "What's your condition? Maybe I won't agree."

"You'll have no reason not to. There's another one, not as big. I haven't gone into it either, but I've every reason to think it's dangerous.

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I want you to go into that one with me first. If I'm right, you'll get a little seasoning there. When we tackle Number Nineteen you're going to need some."

"So you think," Robin said.

Kit motioned her to silence. "I'm all for seasoning. Have you got any reason for thinking this one's not quite so hairy? Besides its being smaller?"

March shook his head.

"Then I'll go. When do we do it?"

Robin said, "I'd like to know what reasons he's got for thinking it's dangerous at all."

"Tomorrow," March said. The oven buzzed as he spoke.

"Sounds good." Kit untied her cord. "Everybody ready for food?"

The trout was served in Pyrex-topped dishes with tiny hatches that slid away at the touch of a fork. Kit demonstrated, thrusting her own fork in, and pulling it out laden with fish and spinach. March tried it, and a wisp of spinach floated away before his fork was halfway to his mouth. "Chopsticks might be better," he suggested.

Robin giggled.

"You've got 'em," Kit told him. "There's a trigger at the front of the handle. Feel it? Pull that, and the chow bar flips over to hold your stuff on. Loosen up when it's in your mouth, and you can get your food out.

"Robin, can you clean up that spinach for me? Make yourself useful?"

"You betcha."

The *Truite Farcie aux Epinards* was delicious. March took another bite before he said, "Ever hear of the Thugs?"

Kit chewed reverently and swallowed. "Like muggers, Windy?"

"Not quite. There was a cult called Thuggee, and the members were the original Thugs. They worshipped Death and sacrificed people to her."

Robin muttered, "Why do we always get blamed?"

"Mostly they strangled them, although I believe they also stabbed a few. They offered the deaths of their victims to their goddess, and kept the victims' possessions to cover operating expenses. The Brits wiped them out two hundred years back."

"Why are you telling us this, Windy?" Kit's hand hovered over the clip that would hold her fork when she had no need of it.

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"Because it seems like they're with us again, in a new and improved Westernized form. And I'm not telling you and Sue. Just you."

"You mean they gave up the goddess business?"

March shook his head. "The West has never abandoned religion, Kit. You just think it has because you and your friends have. Okay, I'm your friend and I'd like to be more. But you know what I mean."

"We'll talk about that other thing sometime when we're alone." For a moment, Kit looked a trifle stunned. "You — You said they were Westernized, Windy. If you didn't mean no goddess, what did you mean?"

"Computers, secure lines of electronic communication, and hoppers just to start with. Guns. Poisons. Ever been in an abattoir?"

"A slaughterhouse? No, and I don't want to go."

"You're going." March sighed. "Or I think you are. You said you'd go into this one — into Number Thirteen — with me if I'd go into Number Nineteen with you. Something like that. That's what it came down to."

"This is good." Robin paused to sniff the fish on her fork. "Has anybody told you so yet? It's really luscious, and you'd better finish yours before it gets cold."

Obediently, Kit ate. "Food doesn't taste as good when you're scared."

"Then I wish I weren't," March told her, "and you won't be in Number Thirteen. Or I don't think so. If you'd been in a modern abattoir, you'd know the cattle aren't frightened. Fear makes them noisy and hard to control, so it's been eliminated. They get on a slow belt that doesn't shake at all, or make any kind of sound. It moves them down a narrow chute, and by that time they're used to chutes. This one seems less frightening than most. But when they get to the bottom and start back up, they're dead."

"You're not eating," Kit said.

"I thought you'd have another question." March took a forkful of trout and chewed it with appreciation. It was still delicious. Firm, fresh trout and tender, young spinach. Onions, shallots, cream, and something else. No, he corrected himself, several somethings else.

"Well, I do," Robin said. "You told us you hadn't been in there. Or implied it anyway."

Seeing that March intended to ignore her, Kit asked, "Is that right, Windy? You've never been inside?"

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"Correct."

"Then how did you know I wouldn't be scared?"

"Because the others weren't. When I was still poking around the asteroid belt, I picked up the traffic of a party going in there. Or at least, I think that's where they were going. They weren't afraid. When the first stopped transmitting, the rest just tried to raise him. The last one thought her icom had gone out. About a minute later, she went silent, too."

Robin said, "He may fool you, Kit, but he's not fooling me. I know him too well. They went into the big one, the one he's so scared of. Not the little one he's been talking about."

"Did they, Windy? Was it really Number Whatchacallit and not the one you want us to shoot next?"

"Number Nineteen," March said. "The one I'm hoping will give you a little experience without killing us is Number Thirteen."

"Thirteen?" Robin grinned. "Oooh! That's scary!"

"Shut up," March told her.

The grin widened. "You betcha. But I thought you weren't talking to me, Marchy darling."

"I wasn't. It didn't work, and I should have known it wouldn't. You always chipped away until I said something you could throw back at me in court. You haven't changed, and neither have I."

He paused to collect his thoughts. When neither woman spoke, he said, "Sue doesn't really care, Kit, but you may. If I'd been assigning numbers to the memorials I found for advertising purposes, Number Nineteen would have gotten thirteen. I wasn't doing that. Number Thirteen was the thirteenth I found. That's all. Number Nineteen was the nineteenth. I could take you to Number Fourteen or Number Twenty. Both those look pretty safe. Just say the word if you'd like to go."

Kit said, "I've finished my trout, Windy. So has Robin. Finish yours, so I can serve dessert."

"No salad? That's not like you."

"You're right. I forgot. Eat your trout."

"In a moment. Sue had — "

"It's Robin, dammit!" She was untying her cord.

"It wasn't Robin when Sue and I were married," March told Kit, "and

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if she tries to live up to that red dye-job, I'll have to defend myself. I hope you understand."

"I'm bigger and stronger than she is," Kit said levelly. "She may not know it, but I am. If she cuts up rough she'll find out fast."

"I'm a black belt!" Robin screamed.

"Sure you are — a black belt in Bad Sock Hop. You needed me when Jim kicked down your door, remember?"

March cleared his throat. "Right now I want to grab you and kiss you, Kit. I want it as much as I've ever wanted anything in my life. What do you say?"

"I think it had better wait. You know what we did last time."

"All right." March sighed. "Your friend Sue had a legitimate question. Could the people whose transmissions I caught have been going into Number Nineteen? There were three empty hoppers near Number Thirteen, so I think that's where they went. I could be wrong."

He took a bite of trout. As he had expected, it was still quite hot. "What's in this, Kit? What's the taste I can't label?"

"Could be the fresh tarragon. Or the cider." Kit grinned. "Or my secret ingredient."

Robin muttered, "Watch for bones."

THEY MET a mile plus from Number Thirteen, he in his worn orange suit, she looking like a lingerie model wrapped in cellophane. "We're alone now," he said, and gestured. "This is interplanetary space, so we're as alone as two people can be. Will you marry me, Kit?"

"Robin's listening, Windy. I told her to listen in, and call the network for help if we stopped transmitting."

"Kit — "

"It's just common sense. After what you'd told me, I thought we ought to take a few precautions. I told her to ask for Bad Bill, or Phil Inglis if she couldn't get hold of Bill. Tell them we're in trouble and ask for help."

March did not know what to say, and if Kit did, she did not say it. Silence closed around them, the menacing silence of the giant planet above them and the cool and watchful silence of the stars.

At last Kit said, "Are you there, Robin? Speak up."

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"She probably doesn't know how to work the set."

"I showed her. Robin?"

"Maybe she'd rather listen than talk. That would be a first for her, but it's possible."

"Poor Robin." Kit's face, distorted only slightly by the plastic bubble of her helmet, looked as though she meant it. "You don't want to admit that she might have a single shred of human decency."

"All right, I admit it. She's probably got one, even if I couldn't find it."

"You think she's listening in." From her expression, Kit thought it was at least possible.

"I don't think it or not think it. I don't care one way or another. But I'll tell you this. If she is, she'll let us know when she hears what I'm going to say next."

He took a deep breath of far-from-odorless suit air. "I know I'm not handsome, Kit, and thanks to your friend Sue, I'm just about broke. You're a star, and I'm a washed-up producer who was never terribly big anyway. Knowing all that — because I know you know it, too — will you marry me? Please? As soon as we get back to New York?"

Kit listened for a moment. "You're right. She'd be screaming at me not to do it. She's not there. Come on, let's have a look at this mugger tomb."

"You didn't say no." Suddenly March felt at least ten years younger.

"I didn't say yes, either. The guy who sold me my suit said to lock arms."

He complied, and she switched on her jets; a moment later he turned on his own as well.

"Looks pretty dark in there, Windy. You got a helmet light?"

"If you'd like to think it over, that's fine." For a moment he wrestled with his feelings. "All right, it isn't really fine but I'll wait. I'll wait till tomorrow or next week or next month."

"Thanks."

"Or next year. I — I don't know how to say this, but I'll wait for as long as you ask me to, just as long as you don't say no. And if you should change your mind after that, I'll probably come running. Hell, I know I will. I love you. I love you, and I know I'll never stop loving you. You're...I can't put it into words, Kit, but I'll never get over it."

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Her hand tightened on his, and her smile shone through her plastic helmet bubble. "You've got a lovely voice, Windy. Anybody ever tell you so?"

He shook his head. "I've got a lousy voice and I know it. It sets people's teeth on edge. No resonance, no overtones."

"Handsome is as handsome does, Windy, and you've got a voice that says beautiful things. You just proved it."

"Is that why you didn't say no?"

"That and a whole lot of other reasons." Kit pointed. "This fake lintel they carved out of the rock — what are those things pretending to hold it up? Is that a bird?"

"You didn't say yes, either. Is it the money?"

"I've got enough for both of us. Tell me about the bird."

"It's an adjutant stork. The other animal is a jackal, I think. They're symbols of death."

"Don't storks bring babies?"

"Not this kind. Those are nice storks. Won't you tell me why you didn't say yes, Kit?"

"Well, for one thing, you don't say you love me often enough."

"I just did." When she did not reply, March added. "We'd better slow up."

"Okay, I'm turning 'em down. Are you good with these controls?"

"Fair. Yours are probably a little different."

"Then look at this and tell me why it's not working." Kit held out her left arm.

For a moment, he studied the buttons and the tiny screen. "You don't have Jets up." He pushed three buttons in rapid succession. The looming asteroid still rushed toward them, but it rushed no faster. "You've got to hit Control, select Jets, and press the Down key."

"We're still going awfully fast, Windy."

"Of course we are. There's no air resistance. Why didn't you say yes? You said there were a lot of reasons. Give me two or three."

"I gave you one already. I know you said it just now, but you don't say it often. Bad Bill's another. I want to get dramatic roles, not just kids shows and cooking shows, all that crap. Marrying you would hurt my career — or it would just now, anyway."

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"If he found out, yes. What are you going to say if Bad Bill asks you to marry him?"

"That he'll have to dump Loretta." Kit was grinning.

"And if he does?"

"It'll take a while. I know her, and she'll put up a fight. You could give lessons on that stuff, Windy. Why are you asking me?"

"And meanwhile — ?"

"Meanwhile, I'll get some roles I want. Can we slow down? I'm getting scared."

"Wait till we get inside, Kit. Be scared then." March spun them both until their reduced jets were braking.

"Can I give you another reason? One more."

"That's enough."

"I want to. I didn't say yes — yet — because it would hurt you. Bad Bill hates your guts already for showing him up. If we get married and he finds out, he's going to hate you worse than poop on his birthday cake. It'll be twenty times rougher than it is now."

March chuckled. "It couldn't be."

"He could hire a hit. He's got the contacts and the money won't mean a thing to him. You can hire a good pro to smoke somebody for the price of a really nice hopper. Did you know that?"

"I'd heard." March nodded.

"So how many nice hoppers could Bad Bill afford? I'd say a hundred. At least that many."

Kit's helmet LEDs stabbed invisibly at the entrance, which glared as though under a spotlight. "There! I got it on. Only it's not as dark in there as it was."

"Turn it off," March told her. "Turn it off, and get your digicorder rolling. We want both digicorders for this one."

They entered cautiously, he keeping them six feet above the stone floor.

"It looks safe enough, Windy."

He glanced at her; the blue-green light of the tomb had robbed her face of rouge as well as blood. "Did Ms. Applefield say it was?"

Here lies the founder of our faith and prophet of the goddess. The voice might have been that of the blue-green illumination. *Jayashankar*

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the Great here reposes in his house of Eternity, as he wished. We, his disciples, have laid him here. Would you learn Truth, O visitors? Our faith is truth, and truth is joy. Like us, you are the subjects of the goddess. Know it. To know it, to rejoice in it, is paradise. Enter with—

"Kit!" March grabbed her arm, his fingers flying across her keyboard. "What's up, Windy!"

"Air! They're flooding the place with air. Look behind you."

She did, and saw what he had known she would see: a steel door blocking the entrance and pinning their lifelines to the floor. "Are...Are we locked in?"

You are free. There are switches to left and right, switch pads we have made large for you, so there can be no mistaking them. Black shuts, for black is the color of the goddess. Yellow opens. It will return you to the world of illusion. To open, you need only press the yellow pad to your right.

"You're saying there's air in here, Windy? That we could live in here without the suits?"

"There's air in here, and you'll die if you take off your helmet." He unhooked her lifeline. "It's poisoned — I don't know what with."

A new voice said, "If it were poisoned, we'd be dead." It was a man's voice, a resonant baritone.

A woman who was not Kit added, "We'll die if you break the hermetic seal now. We've no suits, so we'll suffocate. Please don't."

A naked man and a naked woman had emerged from hidden entrances on either side of the tomb, he tall and muscled like a bodybuilder, she sleek and big breasted, walking on her toes though she wore neither shoes nor boots. They crossed the stone floor as if subject to gravity, and smiled as they looked up at Kit and March. The man said, "For as long as you're strangers in the paradise of the goddess, we shall guide you."

"Holograms, Windy?" Kit looked as if she were about to cry. "I know they aren't real. Are they holograms?"

The naked man reached up and grasped her boot at the ankle. "Come here, my lovely, lovely friend. Kiss me but once, and you may call me false thereafter."

"They're droids!" Kit's other boot caught the naked man full in the face.

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"Get up!" March unhooked his own lifeline. "Get out of reach."

Scooping up the naked woman, he jetted toward the steel door and flung her at the right-hand switch. The arc that burned and melted her plastic skin half-blinded him.

"Up here, Windy!" Kit waved as a stone flung by the male droid struck his thigh.

He rose to meet her, and she hugged him. "We're trapped. How can we get out?"

"Pray," he said, and the Latin of an ancient prayer chanted in deep corridors of his mind.

"That won't help!"

"It'll keep us calm and let us think, Kit. Pretty often, that's all it has to do."

Another stone whizzed past them, a near miss.

"He's breaking them loose," Kit whispered. "My God, but he's strong!"

"Nuclear powered?"

"Do you really think so, Windy? I — watch out! I didn't think they could make them that little."

"They can't. It could be a fuel cell, but it's most likely batteries, and they'll have to be pretty small. The power draw he needs to bust that rock will be pulling him down fast. Have you noticed what happens to the ones he's thrown?"

"They keep bouncing around. There's no gravity."

March nodded. "Just air resistance. It slows them a little, but it will take a long time to stop them. Suppose we catch a couple and — "

The steel door was sliding up, not quite soundlessly now that the interior of the tomb was filled with air. He shot toward it with all jets at one hundred percent and Kit trailing after him like a kite; Kit's free arm caught Robin as she crossed the threshold.

Back in Kit's hopper, with beverage bulbs bubbling in the microwave, March took a seat at the little table and tied himself down. "Grab a chair, Sue. I won't bite."

"It was dangerous in there, wasn't it? That's why you and Kit came out so fast."

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"We just about got killed," Kit told her. "Windy saved us."

"Sue saved us," March said dryly. "She didn't intend to, but she did."

"Yes, I did! Not you, March, but Kit. She wanted me to listen on the icom and call for help if you two got in trouble, but I knew it would be too late. So I watched you instead and put on my Star-Chick Number Nine as soon as you had gone inside."

Kit handed her a steaming beverage bulb. "We'd have been trapped in there and died if it hadn't been for you."

"I'd have gotten us out," March said.

"Sure, Windy. Here's your coffee." Kit laid her vacuum tray on the table and sat down, groping for the cords that would hold her in her chair. "Now it's Answer Time. Know what I mean? The last five minutes of the show, when Mike Wanitsky fiddles with his gun — "

Robin tittered.

"And tells us how he knew the cocker spaniel was the real murderer. You, Windy, are Mike Wanitsky."

"Thanks. I've always wanted to be a really good-looking cop."

"You just said you'd have gotten us out. How would you have done it?"

"I don't know." March sipped his coffee and jiggled the bulb to stir the sugar. "I just know that it could be done, and I could do it. Did you think there were people in there lying to us through the droids and running things? There weren't."

"I never even thought about it."

"Nobody wants to spend weeks or months sitting around in a tomb waiting for somebody to come in. They build those things — the great majority of them were never meant to be traps for human beings — and go back to America or the E.U. or whatever. So what you're dealing with when you go into one of the bad ones is a machine. It can be a sophisticated machine, which that one was. But it's still just a machine, built by someone who didn't have all the time in the world to plan it or all the money in the world to spend on it."

Robin said, "So you'd have gotten out."

"Correct. Maybe I'd have found the circuitry that controlled the door. Maybe something else. But I'd have gotten us out."

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"I want to go back to the beginning, Windy. You told us about overhearing some people's transmissions from in there. Remember?"

"Sure. I believe I can remember something else, too." March scratched his head. "Weren't you the one who began at the end? That's how I seem to remember it. I don't think it was Sue, and I know damned well it wasn't me."

"Right. It was, and it was a mistake. You said the woman you overheard — it was a woman, wasn't it?"

"That last one?" March nodded.

"You said she thought her icom had gone out and kept trying to talk to the others until she went dead herself. What happened to her?"

"Strictly speaking, I don't know. I wasn't there. I might make a pretty good guess, though, now that I've been inside. What happens when you're wearing a suit and you get into your hopper, where there's air?"

Kit looked puzzled. "I take it off."

"I know!" Robin waved both hands. "The salesman told me when I bought mine. It stops using the air in the tank and takes in air from outside."

"Correct. You can disable that if you know the codes. If you do, you have to switch the system over manually when you want it switched. When you go into that Thuggee tomb, it shuts the door and fills the tomb with air to turn your suit air off. There's something in that air to kill or disable you, something that has to be pretty dilute because the tomb's big. The woman I heard may have been in an area where the air was relatively pure. Or maybe she wasn't a deep breather or had a slow suit. Whatever."

"Wouldn't she have seen the others fall down?"

"Sure, if they'd fallen." March grinned. "How do you fall without gravity? My guess is that they seemed to be moving around pretty normally. It probably makes you dopey at first. Later it may kill you, or the droids may do it. The idea of their machine offering lives to Death — real throats really cut on an altar — would tickle the kind of people who build things like that." He sipped his coffee.

Kit said, "He grabbed my arm and reprogrammed my suit, Robin. As soon as the air started, he knew what was up."

"Hooray."

"Don't be like that. Windy saved my life, and if he hadn't I wouldn't

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have been around to save yours. Besides we got some great footage. Only I wish you'd waited until we'd thrown rocks back at the droids."

"We can go in there again," March said.

"After Number Nineteen maybe. Not now. I've got one more question."

"Fine with me, as long as I get to ask one after I've answered yours."

"Yes, if you promise to be nice. Robin won't bother us. Okay, here's my last question. The floor was stone, right? But the droids walked on it, and stayed down there like there was gravity. Only there wasn't any. How did they do it?"

March smiled. "That's a good one, and I hadn't even thought of it. You've got rare-earth magnets in your boots. You probably know that. It's why you stick to the floor of this hopper till you take them off. They let you walk on the outside if you want to, stand on the roof and so on. Those droids had rare-earth magnets in the soles of their feet."

Robin objected. "But it was a *stone* floor."

"That's right, Windy. Cut right out of the asteroid or whatever you call it."

"A lot of asteroids and meteorites contain a lot of iron. Ever heard of Excalibur, King Arthur's sword?"

Kit nodded.

"Now you know where the legend came from." Pausing, March sipped his coffee. "Here's my question for you. You knew right away that the droids weren't real people. How?"

"I looked at the woman, that's all. So did you. I know you did — she was naked and you're not gay."

"All right, I did."

"She had a perfect figure, didn't she? No figure flaws. None. Real women always do. Big feet or thick ankles. No calves, like Robin. Bony knees. Thunder thighs. There's always something wrong. Women on vid can look perfect. So can women in magazines. But they look perfect because the cameramen and directors know just how not to shoot them. Watch the tabloids and you'll see the other thing, the flaws that some paparazzi shot through the fence."

There was another hopper not far from their own when March left Kit's. Curious, he jetted a few miles, tapped the airlock politely with a

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wrench from his utility belt, and pressed his helmet to the hatch.

After half a minute, there had been no sound from inside. By law, airlocks could not be locked or barred; he was tempted to go inside and take a look around. He contented himself with a tour of the exterior.

It was, he decided, the oldest hopper he had ever seen, one that had actually begun life as an RV. Its pressure-bulged sides and top were battered, and had been holed more than once and patched with epoxy. Peering through its tinted windshield and windows revealed an interior to match — an unmade bunk, worn seats, cigarette butts and trash everywhere.

What it did not reveal was a human being. No one awake, asleep, or dead. When his inspection was complete, he jetted over to his own hopper — to the pre-owned hopper he had considered ready for the scrap heap before he had seen the one he was leaving.

He had taken off his helmet and was pulling off his boots when he smelled cigarette smoke.

"I hope you don't mind me coming in like this," the smoker said; he was young, with a face a quarter of an inch too long to be handsome. "Okay if I smoke in here? You've got a good air system. It's taking care of it."

"Sure." March opened his suit. "What's up?"

"I need to talk to you, that's all. I need a little info, and it seemed like this was the place to get it. You were over in the big hopper you're grappled to? The new maroon job?"

"Uh huh."

"Okay. Listen, I just want one little piece of info. Just one, and I don't think there's anything secret about it. I could go over and pound on the lock, and somebody would tell me, okay? So who does that big hopper belong to?"

"I want some info, too," March said, "and the info I want had better not be secret either. Let's start with an easy one. Is this a friendly visit?"

"Absolutely. I know you must be ticked off because I came in the way I did." The smoker ran slender fingers through glossy, coal-black hair. "But my jetsuit's pretty uncomfortable, and to tell the truth I'm not sure how far I can trust it."

"Besides," March said, "you couldn't smoke in there."

"Right. I realize I'm using up some extra oxy that way, but it doesn't amount to much."

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"That's good to know. Here's question number two. Want some coffee?"

"Sure, if you do."

"I do." March climbed out of his suit and stowed it in the locker. "I'm kind of bushed, and I've got the feeling you're not somebody I ought to deal with unless I'm fresh." He went to his hopper's tiny microwave.

"You don't have to deal with me." The smoker bent to grind out his cigarette on March's floor. "Tell me what I want to know — that one thing — and I'm out of here. You can go to bed."

"Wondering whether you'll come back inside once I'm asleep."

"Yeah." The smoker looked thoughtful. "There's that. I won't, but you can't know it. You could hop somewhere else. Take a long hop. I wouldn't know where you'd gone."

March shook his head. "I've got another question. What's my name?"

"What's *your* name? I thought you'd want to know mine."

"You can ask your own questions. I'll ask mine. You heard it. Who am I?"

"I've got no frigging — I don't know. You want to tell me?"

"No. I want you to tell me. Tell me who I am, so I'll know where we stand."

"I can't. I don't know."

"You don't know who owns the big red hopper, either." March reached past the locker to his tool box, flipped it open, and pulled out a two-pound dead-blow hammer.

"You're not going to need that."

"I hope not. Think you could take me?"

The smoker shook his head. "Not as long as you're holding that I couldn't."

"Good." The tool box snapped shut. "If you answer every question I ask, fast, I won't have to use it. Did you snoop around my hopper?"

"A little bit, yes."

"Fine." The microwave beeped, but March ignored it. "What were you looking for?"

"An ashtrap and cigarettes. I don't have many. If I found any, I was going to bum one."

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"There are at least twenty books in this hopper. Maybe more. Did you look at them? Any of them?"

The smoker shook his head. "Just for an ashtrap and cigarettes. I told you."

"I asked you that because my name's written in the front of most of them. I'm March Wildspring. Ever heard of me?"

The smoker's grin took March by surprise.

"You have," March said. "Tell me about it."

"I've just heard you mentioned a couple dozen times. You're a real dyed-in-the-wool son of a bitch. That's what she says. I've been wanting to meet you."

"Congratulations. You have. Who said it?"

"My wife. Her name's Robin Redd."

March nodded to himself, recalling Robin's swollen eye and bruised cheek. "I should have seen that coming, and I didn't. You're Jim."

"Right." The smoker extended his hand. "Jim Redd. Glad to meet you."

March ignored it. "You bought that old hopper — the cheapest one you could find — and came out here looking for your ex-wife."

"Hell, no." Redd shook a cigarette from a vacpack, crumpled the pack, and stuffed it into his pocket. "I'm looking for my wife, Robin Redd."

"She says you're divorced."

"Bullshit. Me and Robin aren't divorced till it's final, and that hasn't happened. No final decree, capeesh? I'm fighting to save my marriage, and I'm going to keep on fighting as long as there's a marriage to save."

March sighed. "You've come way the hell out here, millions of miles, looking for her?"

"Right."

"So you can beat hell out of her and save your marriage."

Redd lit his cigarette. "I wouldn't put it like that."

"How would you put it?"

"I want to talk to her, that's all. I want to sit her down and make her listen to what I've got to say. If she'll just shut up for a minute and hear my side of it, she'll come home with me. I know that. The trick is to get her to shut up and listen. Out here, I thought maybe she would."

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"Would you care to tell me what you plan to say to her?"

Redd inhaled and allowed the smoke to trickle from his nostrils before answering. "What I want or don't want doesn't matter. I can't tell you, because you're not her."

"I see. Sue and I — I call her Sue. She was Sue Morton when we were married, and Sue Morton afterward, too. She kept her own name."

"I wouldn't have let her do that."

March's shoulders rose and fell. "I did. I let her do anything she wanted."

"She dumped you anyhow? That's what she says — that she dumped you. Maybe you dumped her."

"No. She dumped me."

"It makes you crazy, just thinking about it. I can see that."

March nodded.

"Okay, that's how it is for you. I don't want it to be like that for me, capeesh? I'd like to have you on my team. But if you're on her team, that's okay, too. I only want what's good for her, which is staying married and making this one work."

"She says you hit her." March struggled to remember. Had anyone really said that Jim had done it? Or had it only been implied?

"A few times. Yeah. She got me so damned mad. Ask me if I'd break her arms to save our marriage."

"Would you?" March sighed again.

"Hell, yes. Can I tell you about the names? I'll feel better."

"If you like."

"I picked her up for a date one time, and she showed me a paper. A legal paper, you know? It said she'd changed her name. You have to have a lawyer and pay a couple thou, but you can do that. Her new name was Robin Redd. I go what the fuck, we're not even engaged. And she said when we got married she didn't want to change her name. It would be putting herself down — she had a fancy word, but that was what it meant. So this way she could tell everybody she was keeping her old name."

March glanced at his wristwatch. It was twenty-four hundred. Midnight. Aloud, he said, "I guess that meant a lot to her."

"Then after we were married, she told people we had the same last name because I'd changed mine to match hers. She said my real name was

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Rosso. That was my grandfather's name, and I'd told her one time. My dad changed it. You see where I'm coming from, March?"

"Not as well as you do yourself." How could he be this tired without gravity? "I need sleep. I'm going to offer you a bargain. You can accept it or reject it, but you have to leave this hopper promptly either way. Is that clear?"

"I got it."

"Fine. You promise not to go to the big maroon hopper tonight. Everybody in there's asleep anyway, and I don't want you waking them up. In the morning — let's say ten o'clock — I'll go there with you and introduce you."

"I get to go inside? To see them?"

Wearily, March nodded.

"Then it's a deal." Redd extended his hand again; this time March accepted it and they shook.

When Redd had gone, March got some coffee, icommed Kit, and stayed on until she answered. "This better be important, Windy. I was sound asleep."

"I don't think it is, but you will. You were the one who hauled Sue out here. Have you been looking out your windows lately?"

"No. Tell me."

"There's an old beat-up hopper out there. Blue originally, but showing a lot of gray primer and rust. It's Jim's, and he was ready to pay you a little visit tonight."

"Can he do that?"

"Legally, yes. All he has to do is claim he has some kind of emergency. If he does, you've got to let him in. He may not know that, but it's the law."

"Or he might."

"Bingo. I got him calmed down and promised I'd bring him over myself tomorrow at ten. That's today now. This morning."

"I see.... Does he know Robin's here?"

"No. But he suspects it pretty strongly. Strongly enough for him to turn your hopper inside out looking for her."

"Unless you're around to stop him."

"Unless we both are. He's at least ten years younger than I am, and he may have a gun or a knife — he's the type. The thing for you to do is hop

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back to Kennedy, and I mean right now. Shove Sue out of your hopper as soon as you get there and tell her that her trip's over. In a day or two you can come back here if you want. Or not."

Slowly, Kit said, "I won't do it, Windy." In the screen, her face looked troubled.

"You'd better change your mind. I told Jim I'd bring him over at ten. I like to keep my word."

"I know you do, Windy. It's one of the things I love about you. Have I said that?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so."

"I don't go back on mine, either. We're a couple of old-fashioned people, Windy. We belong together. Don't worry about Robin or me. We'll think of something."

"I hope so." He felt he was about to choke. "I love you, Kit. The two of us can handle him. I can handle him alone if I have to."

A sad nod and a blown kiss, and she was gone. He muttered "out," switching the icom function back to Standby.

NEXT MORNING, over coffee and a single-pouch self-heating breakfast, March pondered strategy. Would it be better to arrive promptly, or to give Kit more time to prepare?

Prepare what? What preparations were possible? She might try to coach Robin on ways of dealing with men, but Robin had been as unteachable as anyone he had ever known. Granted, Kit was probably a better teacher, and Kit was certainly better positioned to teach.

If he waited for Redd to come and get him, he could achieve the maximum possible delay — but only if Redd actually came. What if Redd waited until ten, then jetted over to Kit's hopper alone? What if Redd didn't wait, for that matter? It might be best if he went to Kit's hopper now and waited for Redd there.

He glanced at his watch. It was already nine fifteen; he suited up and jetted to Redd's hopper. Three raps on Redd's airlock elicited three answering raps from inside. He opened the airlock, entered the tiny chamber, and shut the hatch behind him. In half a minute, the second hatch opened. "You're early," Redd told him.

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March nodded. "I thought we ought to talk about what we're going to do when we get there."

"If you mean discuss it, there's nothing to discuss. I can tell you straight out. Want some coffee?"

It would have to be found and microwaved. March said he did.

"Sit down. Espresso? Cappuccino?"

"Just coffee, thanks. Whatever you have."

"One espresso doppio and one caffè Americano. I'm a coffee snob. I bet you'd never have guessed."

"You'd win."

"My family's in ice cream. One of these days I want to open a coffee shop. There's a hell of a lot of coffee shops, and the coffee stinks." Redd put two bulbs into a microwave that looked older than he did and shut the door. "Ready before you can fart. I'll sell coffee and Dad's ice cream. Con him into putting some money into it. I could make it go."

"I'm sure you could," March told him.

"Damn right. Arabica, the real thing, roasted and ground in my kitchen that morning. Made right, in clean equipment. Most guys have never had a decent cup of coffee."

"What are you doing now? Got a good job?"

"Pretty good. I'm a sound man at UDN. Or I was, before I quit to look for her. Same place Robin works. You used to work there, too."

The microwave buzzed.

"I'll get it. Sit tight."

It was good coffee just as Redd had promised. March sipped and sipped again, finding that the flavor improved with repetition.

"That's arabica. I filled the bulbs before I left and froze them. Robusta's what you've been drinking. Arabica's better, smoother, more complex. Less caffeine, but you can't have everything."

March smiled. "It takes a long time for some of us to learn that."

"Her, you mean. Robin. You're right, she hasn't. Nobody's good enough for her. You weren't and I'm not either."

"But you can bring her around just by talking?"

"You watch. You wanted to know what we'd do when we got there. Only last night you wouldn't say she was there. She is and I know it. You wouldn't be acting like you are if she wasn't."

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"I never refused to tell you that." March set his bulb on the wheezing old vacuum table. "I wouldn't tell you who owns the big hopper. You never asked about your wife."

"I'm asking now."

"And I'm answering. Yes. She's in there, staying with the owner."

"You out here trying to get her back?"

"Hell no." March rubbed his big jaw. "I'd spit on your floor, but you'd try to break my nose for it and it's been broken twice already. You can have her. Anybody can have her as far as I'm concerned. And if you'll just take her to a town that I've never heard of on some God-forsaken island, I'll go dancing down the street."

Redd tossed his empty bulb to the table surface. "That's good. I'd fight you for her, and I'd beat you. Only I like you and don't want to. Couple more questions before we go? These might help me."

March glanced at his watch. "Sure."

"Why wouldn't you tell me who owns the big hopper?"

"Because she's a woman and I was afraid you'd go over there and push her around when I wasn't looking."

"But I wouldn't push around a guy? Hey, I've pushed around quite a few."

"I believe you. I thought you might be more careful, just the same. Wait for me to take you over this morning."

Redd grinned. "Okay, I've waited. Finish your coffee and let's go."

March was still in his suit when Redd stepped from Kit's airlock and took off his helmet. "Here he is," March said. "Kit, this is Sue's husband, Jim Redd. Jim, this is Kit Carlsen. You've probably seen her at work."

"Other places, too." Redd hesitated, then smiled. "The lady with the big knife."

"That's me," Kit told him. "Back then, we hadn't been properly introduced, Jim. Now we have. Shake?"

"Sure." He opened his suit and pushed it toward his knees. "Pleased to meet you properly, Kit. Only I want to say Ms. Carlsen, because that's what we had to call you while you were hosting *Kids' Klassics*."

"You worked on that?" Kit tilted her head.

"Great body language, Ms. Carlsen. Nobody in the business does it better."

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"Thanks, but I still don't remember you."

"I filled in for Don Ayres when he was on vacation or sick, Ms. Carlsen."

"He's a sound tech," March explained.

"Like Robin?"

Redd nodded. "I taught her while we were together. I thought she could get a job at the network and make us a little extra. She waited till she got on there and dumped me. She's a good dumper. Ask March."

Kit nodded. "He's told me already. She dumped you, but you've come way out here where people don't belong to get her and take her back to New York."

"To talk to her so she'll come back with me willingly. Right. I'm not a kidnapper, Ms. Carlsen, no matter what Robin's told you. With a couple of witnesses, I'm sure as shit not a kidnapper."

"You wouldn't hit her?"

Redd kicked off his suit and stowed it in a locker with his helmet.

"Would you hit her?" Kit repeated. "I'd like to know."

"I know you would, and I had to think it over so I could give you an honest answer. I want to be honest with you, Ms. Carlsen. I don't want to lie to somebody I admire so much. I want her to sit down and listen to me. No jumping up screaming. No yelling about cops or bad things she said I did. Things I really didn't do, by the way. You won't believe that, but it's the truth. They're lies she made up so she could dump me, and she's said them over and over to me and everybody she's ever talked to until she practically believes them herself."

"I hear you."

"Only if I had to bat her a couple of times to get her to sit down and shut up, I'd do it. Nothing she wouldn't get over in a day or two. So will I smack her? I don't want to, but I will if I have to. You want to tell her to come out, Ms. Carlsen? If you don't, I'm going to go looking for her."

March said, "She's not here. I know you won't believe me, but she's not. Tell him, Kit."

Kit shook her head. "He won't believe me."

"Yes, I will, Ms. Carlsen. Tell me."

March picked up his helmet, replaced it, and began to screw it back on.

"Windy — that's Mr. Wildspring to you — told me you were here

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looking for Robin and that the two of you would come here this morning. I woke her up and told her about it. I said we wouldn't let you force her to do anything she didn't want to do. She wanted me to go to the tomb Windy calls Number Nineteen with her. She said we could hide in there until you went away. I told her hell no, Robin, you're out of your mind. We talked about it for a while before we went back to bed. When I got up this morning, she was gone."

"*Merda! La fica stupida!*" Redd slammed his fist into his palm. "If that isn't just like her."

March added, "Her suit's gone, too. She may actually have gone into Nineteen. If so, she's probably dead. You'll want to search this hopper before you do anything else. I know the memorials. You and Kit don't. Give me your word you won't hurt Kit, and I'll try to find Robin."

Kit said, "You can look anywhere you want. I already have. Just don't make a mess."

"To hell with that!" Redd jerked open the fiberglass locker door. "I'm going with March."

"You mean you trust me?" Kit looked — and sounded — slightly stunned.

"If she's here, she's safe." Redd was climbing back into his suit. "She's safe, and I'll catch up to her sooner or later. If she's in some crazy graveyard out in space, she could die. She doesn't have sense enough...."

March closed the airlock behind him and heard no more.

Had Number Nineteen been on the farther side of Jupiter, it would have been necessary to hop, making certain that the speed of the hopper was sufficient to keep it in or near its new orbit when the hop was completed. Number Nineteen was not, but close by — threateningly close to someone who suspected it as deeply as March did.

Back on his own hopper, he cast off from Kit's. Once inside, he hooked up his lifeline, edged the hopper within a hundred feet, and looked down at his utility belt. Its adjustable wrench, its long black flashlight, and its multi-tool had gotten him out of danger...? He tried to count them. Three times? No, five. Five at least.

"One more," he whispered. "Just once more, please. After this I'll go home and never come out here again. I swear to God."

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God was everywhere, or so they said. If so, God was on his utility belt just now. Certainly he was praying to his utility belt. He smiled at the thought.

And God was in Number Nineteen. A dark and vengeful God, perhaps.

There were multiple entrances to Number Nineteen. Six that he could recall, although he had never counted them. His orange lifeline would show Jim Redd which he had taken, if it did nothing else.

Would show Redd, that is, if Redd actually came.

No trailing lifeline revealed the way Robin had gone; she had used none, obviously. One entrance was as good as another; and she might have chosen another memorial in preference to this, no matter what she had said to Kit. She might actually be hiding in Kit's hopper, for that matter.

Passing through his airlock, he stood alone with God in the inhuman desolation of space. Overhead, where he had to crane his neck to see it, spun the huge, semi-spherical rock that might be Hell.

The entrance he chose conformed to no architecture with which he was familiar, a wide, circular port whose smooth black sides might have been metal or polished stone. With his digicorder rolling, he jetted cautiously into it.

"Welcome to paradise." The voice was female, warm, and friendly; it seemed to come from nowhere in particular.

"Thanks." March spoke into his mike. "I've always wanted to go there."

"You're here." The voice giggled. "Well, just about here, anyway. You have to go through our airlock. I'll bet you never thought paradise would have an airlock."

"Or an angel to greet me." March was looking for the airlock and for the source of the female voice.

"It's got both. I'm a watcher. That's what we call people like me. My name's Penny."

"Shouldn't it be Angela?"

"Nope. Penny the Angel. Angela's the blonde. We take turns, us angels. It's my turn, so you're mine. What's your name?"

He told her, and she said, "Well, you're looking too close, March Wildspring."

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He switched on his helmet light. The airlock was deeper in and several steps up, by far the largest he had ever seen. "That looks like a whole room in there."

"It is — we've got gravity here. Did you notice?"

"I've noticed I settled to the floor."

"Right. And you can walk to our airlock, if you're careful not to bounce. Part of our gravity really is gravity like you get on Earth. This rock's real big. It's bigger than the moons of Mars and dense. There's lots of iron in the rock, and that makes it heavy. There's a lot of something else, too, that's heavier. Come in and I'll show you."

March had not moved. "You could tell me now."

"No, I can't. It's against the rules. There's other things — a whole lot of them — you have to see first. The rest of our gravity's turning, only it's not real gravity. It just feels like it. When you were outside you must have seen how fast this rock turns."

Certain by now that she could see him, March nodded.

"He turns it. So it doesn't feel exactly like Earth, but there's enough to keep our bones strong. You know what happens to people who spend too much time in hoppers."

"Sure."

"It's called osteopor'sis. Your bones lose calcium and break easy. Only it won't happen here. Won't you come in? It's paradise, and you don't have to stay."

"That's good, assuming it's true."

"Only everybody does. Everybody wants to stay. I did. You will, too."

March cleared his throat. "Before I come in, I want to ask one question. Just one. Answer it, and I'll come in. Did a girl calling herself Robin come in a few hours ago?"

"Ouch." The young woman sounded genuinely unhappy. "I wish I could tell you, only I can't. There's seven gates. Each gate gets a watcher — we take turns. When somebody comes like you just did, the watcher goes around with them to show them, and the new watcher takes over. I've been on this gate for three sleeps, so she didn't come in through Number Four. But she could have come in through one of the others. I wouldn't know."

"Is there any way to find out?"

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"Of course." The young woman's voice was serious. "You can come inside and look. You know what she looks like, don't you?"

"Yes. Would you like me to describe her?"

"It wouldn't do any good. I can't leave this gate till somebody comes, and she'll look different anyway. Better. Everybody looks better in here."

"Are you saying I wouldn't recognize her if I saw her?" March found he was walking toward the airlock. He wondered just when he had begun, but kept going.

"No. No, I'm not. Not really. Only it might be a while before you knew it was her. Everybody looks better. Sometimes a whole bunch better. We still look like us, but older if we're young and younger if we're old. Prettier, too. You know."

"No," he said. "I don't."

"You will. Come in and you'll see."

"So you can leave your gate." He had stopped in front of the airlock.

"No, not a bit. It's nice here. You'll see that, too. Besides, my friends come around to talk and bring me stuff. Nobody minds being watcher. Nobody minds anything here."

"That's good."

"Except one thing. I'll tell you about that later, after you've seen. I've never done it, but I guess it can be icky."

"I can leave whenever I want to?"

"You won't want to. Just climb in, and I'll shut the big door for you."

"But I can?"

"Naturally you can. Only the people who leave don't want to. That's the thing I said could be bad. Leaving. I'll tell you all about it later."

He mounted the few steps, and the hatch swung swiftly shut behind him. This airlock was the size of a small room. There were chairs, pictures on the walls, and a fireplace, complete with fire. He walked toward it for a better look, and discovered that the hatch had severed his lifeline. "Hey!" he said.

Then, "Penny? Are you still there?"

There was no reply.

The fireplace was real and so was the fire. The logs, however, were not. Some flammable gas with a small feed of oxygen, March decided.

He heard his air supply switch over, and thought of returning it to suit

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air but did not. The new air he breathed smelled better, a clean fresh smell as though it had known a windswept meadow by the sea. Walking around the airlock quickly, he found that he was not dizzy and was not blacking out.

"This," he told his mike, "is surely the strangest of all the memorials, as well as the biggest. If Penny's not a real and living person, her voice certainly conveys that impression."

A wall of the room swung back. "Welcome," the girl standing a foot beyond its arc told him. She sketched a curtsy, lifting a diaphanous scarlet skirt. "Welcome to paradise, Mr. March Wildspring. May you remain long and return soon."

"Thank you." He stepped down from the airlock, and discovered that he was smiling. "Okay if I take off my helmet?"

"Oh, yes! Aren't you sure there's air here? If there wasn't, I'd die."

"I know there is." He unscrewed his helmet. "You'd die if you're real. Are you?"

"You betcha!" She giggled. "Want to touch?"

"Sure. Give me your hand."

"You can't feel much through that glove. I know. I used to have a suit like that, only mine was white and not so big. I kept wanting to take the gloves off."

"Your hand."

She held it out. "It doesn't have to be there. You could touch other places. I wouldn't mind."

Leaving the airlock, he took her hand. "You're not a hologram."

"Of course not. I'm a real live person. Not exactly like you because of the sex thing. Only real close. How do you like me up top?"

"Good." He nodded thoughtfully. "Nice molding."

"I'm not molded! I grew up. I'm a real person, too. Kissing would prove it. Want to kiss?"

"Later, maybe. Right now I'd like to see paradise."

"That's good. Take off your suit. I'll put it in one of these box things for you."

"I'll keep it on. I'm holding onto my helmet, too."

"That way everybody will know you're new, March. It'll be a lot of trouble. You'll see."

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"But I can keep it if I want to?"

"I guess so." She sounded doubtful. "I've never done this before. Watched a gate. This is my first time and they never said anything about suits. So I guess you can..Or if you can't, somebody will tell us. Only I'll be in trouble."

"I'll explain that it was my fault."

"Thanks." She led him past the wall-mounted lockers and the benches on which newcomers presumably sat to take off their boots, and into a wide and apparently sunlit room. A well-remembered face pontificated about politics on a digivid there, too proud to notice the incomplete jigsaw puzzle on the floor before him. A dozen plates held half-finished food, and dolls and a teddy bear occupied comfortable-looking chairs; on the farther side of the room a wide arch opened out onto what appeared to be a sunlit garden on Earth.

He hurried to it, then stopped to stare.

"Isn't it pretty?"

Slowly he nodded.

"How about me? You can see me better in this light. Aren't I pretty, too?"

Turning, he studied her. "You are. You're really quite beautiful." It was the truth.

She laughed, delighted, and smoothed her lustrous coppery hair with both hands.

"Is it all right if I jump?"

"You better not. People turn around funny sometimes. Come down on their heads."

"I'll risk it." Gathering all his strength, he sprang into the air, rising to a height of twenty feet or more. The garden spread as far as he could see, its low hills dotted with little sunlit lakes, trees, tents, airy cottages, and fountains. A quick sweep of his digicorder took it all in — or so he hoped. Skillful manipulation of his suit jets landed him on his feet.

"You're good at it," The young woman told him.

"Not really." He grinned. "I'm wearing a lot of heavy gear and not as young as I used to be. In a way that was an advantage. I knew I wouldn't come down any faster than I had gone up."

"Want something to eat? Or just walk around?"

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"Just walk around. I'd like to talk to some other people."

"In your orange clothes?" She giggled. "You will."

They had not gone more than a thousand yards when they were surrounded by a crowd. More than once, he had found himself in crowds of actors at parties, and the feeling was much the same. Not all the men were tall, but most were handsome; those who were not, were attractive without being handsome, with kind, honest faces suggestive of good humor or sparkling wit.

The women were cute. Or pretty. Or beautiful. All of them.

He raised his hands for silence. "I'm looking for a missing woman. Her name's Robin Redd, and I think she ran in here because she thought a man named Jim was going to kill her. I'm not Jim. I'm a friend...." He let his arms drop.

"Not a friend." The speaker was a silver-maned man who looked as though he might once have been a judge — or played one on vid. "Who are you, then?"

"I used to be her husband, sir."

"If she's in here she's safe, son. Perfectly safe."

A score of voices seconded him.

"Why do you want to take her back to a place of danger?"

March drew a deep breath — air so clean and pure it might have come from a mountain top. "I'll take her back only if she wants to go, sir. If she wants to stay here, that's fine. But I want to know where she is, because she may need help if she's not here. Do you know?"

The silver mane was shaken. "I do not, but I'll try to find out. What's your name, son?"

"March Wildspring."

The young woman said, "Marchy hasn't decided to stay yet, Barney. How can I talk him into it?"

Someone in the crowd asked, "Just talk?" and there was laughter.

The silver-maned man joined it with a throaty chuckle. "When he's seen a few more like you — "

Quickly, the young woman raised an admonitory hand. "That's enough of that. Please! He'll think I'm easy. I'm not, Mr. Wildspring. Don't let this dress fool you. Nobody wears much in the way of clothes in here."

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A beefy man with a likable grin pointed to March. "Nobody but you, that is."

It got another laugh.

"Folks!" March raised his voice. "I'm looking for Robin Redd. I don't want to hurt her." He scanned the crowd though the viewfinder of his digicorder. "If any of you know her, will you please tell her March is looking for her? She can stay here if she wants to, or I'll take her back if she'd prefer to go."

That raised the biggest laugh of all.

A RUSTIC BRIDGE crossed one of several small lakes. The young woman paused halfway across to point out their reflections in the water. "Look there, Mr. Wildspring. See how good-looking you are?"

He did, seeing a grimly handsome man with abundant brown hair and finely chiseled features; this flattering reflection wore what appeared to be a day-glow orange military spacesuit. The young woman beside him was clearly the young woman with him. He raised an arm; the reflection raised an arm as well.

"Aren't we an attractive couple?"

"Yes," he said, "we certainly are."

"If you were to take off all those clothes, would you just throw them away?"

"No. No, Penny, I certainly wouldn't want to do that. If I were to take them off, I'd want a safe place to put them, a place I could find again without much trouble. I'd want to be able to get them back in a hurry if I needed them."

"That's good." The young woman looked thoughtful. "He might want to send you out. He does that sometimes. They can come back later, I think. But they have to go if he says so."

"He runs this? What's his name?"

"I don't know, but there's a big statue of him in a park. We could probably find out there. Everybody just says 'he.' Everybody knows what it means."

"I'd like to see that statue and take some pictures." March indicated his digicorder. "But first I'd like to go on across and get a few of you posing in the middle of this bridge. It should be a lovely shot. Can I do that?"

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"It sounds like fun." She smiled. "Just tell me what poses you'd like."

"I will. You're not afraid I'll run off on my own?"

She cocked her head, looking more charming than ever. "Are you going to?"

"No."

"That's good. Strangers need somebody. A guide. That's why we do it. But you wouldn't have to trick me. Anytime you want to go, you can do it. I'll go back to the gate and wait for you."

"All right, I'll remember that. But wouldn't he have sent somebody else to watch the gate by now?"

"I suppose. I guess so. How'd you like me to pose?"

"Sitting on the railing, I think."

"So you can get my legs. You're right, I've got good legs. How's this?"

It was fine, her long, smooth legs out over the water, one delicately rounded calf resting on the rail, the foot of the other leg hooked around one of the supports, and her gossamer skirt hiked halfway up her thighs. He backed down the bridge, passing a sleeping man and shooting as he went, stopped his digicorder briefly to note the precise number on its whirling dial, and shot more from the bank.

When he rejoined her, he said, "That was beautiful. I've got a couple of questions now. No, three questions. All right if I ask them?"

Her smile would have melted stone. "If I can't answer, we'll find somebody who can."

"First question. If this were Earth, people would've cut their names into this rail. Hearts, with MW plus KC. All that kind of stuff. Nobody's carved anything in this one. Why is that?"

"On Earth we do it so people will remember." The young woman said slowly, "and so we'll remember ourselves. We think maybe it will never happen, he'll dump me or I'll dump him. But years from now when I've almost forgotten, maybe I'll see this. I'll think, oh yeah, he wasn't good-looking or talented, but he had the best heart. If things had gone a little differently...."

March said, "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You didn't. I was just thinking. It's all different now. Different here. That's what I think. We know we're going to remember this place and the people we love here. Remember everything about it forever and ever.

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What's hard is remembering how it was before we got here. Like, I used to have a little apartment back on Earth. It was just two rooms and a bath, and nothing in it could be very big at all. There was a cabinet I couldn't open that had been built into a corner a long time ago and painted white. The white paint had stuck the doors shut."

"I understand." He laid a hand on her shoulder.

"I was pretty sure there was nothing in there, but I always wondered. Now I'm here, and it feels like it happened a long, long time ago to somebody else. Somebody in a show I saw one time, and I wish she'd broken that cabinet open."

The young woman slid from the railing, cocked her head, and smiled. "That wasn't a good answer, but I don't think I can answer any better. You said three questions."

"I did." March sighed. "Here's the next. There's no litter on the lakeshore and no junk floating in the water. There aren't even any cans for garbage. Why not?"

"Because it's ours. This whole place is ours. He gave it to us. We're his, and we own this. It's where we live. On Earth everything belongs to the government, really. In America it does, anyway. They pretend it's yours, but do something they don't like and you'll find out. This really is ours. We can cut down the trees and pick the flowers, but we don't want to. Not mostly. If there were more people, it might be different."

"He sends some away, you said."

Looking pensive, The young woman nodded. "He might send me away someday. I hope not."

"They go back to Earth?"

She nodded again.

"What do they do there?"

"I don't know, and that's more than three. All right, I do. They do whatever he's asked them to, and when they get it all done they get to come back."

"Those weren't my third question," March said, "just follow-ups. Here's the third. When I jumped and looked around, I could see little houses, and when we were up on the bridge I could see two and a tent. Do they have vids in there? Any of them? You had a vid in your room at the gate."

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"I'm not sure, but I think that anybody who wants one gets one. Some people don't. Is there something you want to watch?"

"Yes. I used to work for UDN, and — well, it's kind of complicated. But there are things I want to see. Maybe even things I want to show you. There's no hurry, though. Let's go look at his statue."

It was large and imposing, but not at all what March had expected. An elderly man, bald and rather fat, knelt. His enormous bronze hands were held out to those who had followed a narrow and seemingly aimless path through a wilderness of flowers. They seemed to shelter a sleeper at his feet.

"He looks like my father," March murmured.

"Like my grandfather," the young woman said. "I've never been here. I'm new, and I hadn't gotten around to it. If I'd known how beautiful it was, I'd have come sooner."

March retreated to the path. "I'm going to pan the gardens and stop on you, looking at the statue. Look up at it while you count to ten, normal speed, then turn and look at me and smile."

She did. When he appeared to have stopped recording, she said, "I've found a little notice that tells you about it. The statue's twelve feet high, and the figure of the Founder would be twenty-three feet high if he were standing up. The bronze is eight inches thick. Most statues like this are thin, it said, but they could make this one almost solid because its base sits right on the solid rock of this asteroid. Is it an asteroid? That's what they said."

"I suppose. Does it give his name?"

"Let me see. 'It is composed of copper, tin, and gold, the proportions being fifty, forty, and ten; all three metals were mined during the excavation of the perfect world in which you stand. The sculptors worked from photographs and digivid recordings made during the last years of the Founder's life. The ancient lost wax method was employed to create the statue, although it required wax brought from Earth. His body has perished, but his mind lives on and is your god.' No name. It doesn't name the artists, either."

"It would be an interesting thing to know," March said. "I'm going to keep trying to find out. How many people are there in here?"

The young woman shook her head. "I have no idea."

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"Guess."

She hesitated. "I'm going to say five hundred. About that."

"I would have said fewer. Half that, maybe. Even if you're right, it should be possible to ask all of them."

"About this girl Robin Redd?"

"No. I know where she is, Penny. The name of the Founder's going to be harder, I think."

"I don't, because I don't believe you know where that girl is. You couldn't."

"I do." March sounded as tired as he felt. "You — "

The statue spoke, surprising them both. Its voice was deep, resonant, and kind. "I am pleased — oh, wonderfully pleased — to announce that we have been joined by four this wake. That is the highest total since the five of December twentieth and surpasses the three of February third. Our newest lovers are Robin Redd, Katarina 'Kit' Carlsen, March Wildspring, and James Frankie Redd. Welcome, all!"

March could only stare.

"My dear children," the statue continued, "this wake has wound to a pleasing end. The time of rest is upon us. Repose with me in your humble homes, and repose with whom you like. Sleep, and I promise you that all your dreams will be pleasant ones.

"Though nightmares stalk the dark, if you sleep they cannot trouble you."

"Nightmares?"

The young woman said, "I don't know about them. I guess I've been asleep."

"If they can't hurt sleeping people, how bad can they be?" March was conscious of a slight dimming of the light; the meter built into his digicorder confirmed it.

"Just sleeping people who are inside somewhere." The young woman looked frightened. "That's what I think. We need to get inside."

"You don't know?"

"No! Let's go. These people are nice. Somebody will take us in."

The light had dimmed again, very slightly.

"Can you jog, Mr. Wildspring? I can, and I think we ought to jog until we find someplace that will take us in."

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March shook his head. "Not wearing this. No, I can't jog and won't try."

"Well, take it off." The young woman's fear was almost palpable.

"I won't." March caught her arm. "In a minute I'm going to let you run if you want to, but I need to say something first. If you decide you want out, just look me up. I'll get you out if I can. Understand?"

The young woman nodded and tried to smile. The smile was a pathetic failure.

"Fine." March released her. "You jog ahead and find a place to hide."

His suit felt heavy now even in the slight gravity of Number Nineteen. His wristwatch told him that only six and a half hours of the day had passed for him. The knowledge did nothing to relieve his aching shoulders; he was hot and tired.

"We have seen the founder's statue," he told his mike, "and learned that this asteroid contains copper, tin, and gold. Those metals — the last, particularly — no doubt financed much of the building of this memorial. We have learned two other things of considerable interest. I have, at least, in the course of walking over several miles of it." Some time ago, he had removed his gloves and pushed them under his utility belt. Now he employed a forefinger to wipe his sweating forehead.

"First, this is the only memorial I am aware of that actually enlists visitors to serve its agenda, which we may assume was that of the Founder. As you have heard, some of them are returned to Earth. We can only speculate as to their purpose.

"Second, it seems at least possible that the Founder's accomplishments included one of the holy grails of physics, the creation of artificial gravity. You may recall that our guide told us the gravity here was a combination of mass and spin. Real gravity — gravity from mass — pulls us inward. Spin forces us outward. The two are antithetical, in other words, and cannot be made to act in concert. I would estimate the gravity I feel here to be about one quarter that of Earth. I doubt that a core of heavy metals could provide that much gravity to an asteroid this small, and this asteroid is certainly not spinning fast enough. If it had been, it would have thrown me back into space when I landed."

Beyond the flowery border, a rolling green landscape displayed two neat white cottages some distance apart. The light had diminished twice before March reached the first.

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His knocks brought a remarkably handsome, angry, and suspicious man who answered all March's arguments with "We don't let anybody into our home."

Total darkness came before March reached the second cottage. It was a night without stars, and without the least attempt to counterfeit them. The day sky had been a passable imitation of Earth's: a blue dome traversed by a single bright light, wispy clouds that might, perhaps, have been steam. By night, the cavern was plainly that. The air was cool, and soon grew cooler still.

"March? March?" The voice was plaintive, sad, and old.

"That's me," he said. "Who are you?"

"You left me to die, March. You left me alone in that hospital so you could go off to some meeting. And I died, March. I died alone, abandoned."

"Mom?" His free hand was fumbling with the flashlight on his utility belt.

A child's voice said, "You don't know me. You'll never know me, March. You'll never know me because I was never born. I'm March Wildspring, Jr. I'm the son you never got."

"Uh huh." March's fingers had found the switch. "I'm going to turn this on now, son. You might want to cover your eyes. It's a lot brighter than a helmet light."

He did, and there was no one there. For two minutes and more, the glaring beam probed the darkness in search of the other white cottage he had seen; there was no such cottage, and it began to rain.

Sighing, he returned the flashlight to his belt, resumed his helmet, and switched on his helmet light.

"I sat beside you, March. Beside you in home room, and behind you in history. You let me copy your answers once, March, and I thought you liked me. I liked you and tried to show you I was yours for the asking. You were in all my daydreams, March. Other things changed, but you were always there."

He said nothing, plodding wearily forward. His helmet light showed no one.

"Remember the time I touched your hand? You pulled away. I loved you, and you pulled away."

"You scared me," he told the disembodied voice. "I was one of the

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biggest boys in the class, and you were bigger than I was. You had those hungry eyes."

The old voice said, "You left me alone, March. You left me alone to die."

"You weren't supposed to die." His helmet light revealed no speaker. "There was a meeting I had to attend, a planning meeting for next year's schedule. They said you'd be home in a week."

A dog barked. It was a soft and friendly bark, and though it did not bark again he could hear its panting. "I'm sorry," he told the dog. "I didn't know how sick you were."

By the time he reached the second cottage, he was determined to get in at any cost. "I'm a new arrival," he told the handsome young man who answered his knock. For a moment he paused, sniffing.

"So are we." The young man made no attempt to conceal his naked body. "Get your own dump."

The air March's suit was utilizing now carried a whiff of tobacco smoke. "I'm out here with the nightmares, and I don't like it. I need a place to sleep, and something to eat, if you've got it."

The muscular (and very naked) young man tried to close the door, but March had stuck the toe of his boot into it. "I'll behave myself, and I'll be eternally grateful."

"You get the hell out!"

From behind the muscular young man, Kit's well-remembered voice called, "Let him in, Jim!"

The muscular young man snarled, "Shut the fuck up!"

March's shoulder forced the door open, throwing Jim backward. A split second later, March's left took him in the pit of the stomach. It was followed at once (perhaps unnecessarily) by March's right, which caught the side of Jim's neck.

He went down, March unhooked the flashlight from his belt, and Kit said, "Windy! Thank God." She was wearing the pink brassiere he remembered so well.

He had never tried to kiss anyone though his helmet before. Both laughed, he unscrewed the helmet, they kissed properly, and he picked Kit up and swung her around like a child.

"You shouldn't do that," she told him breathlessly. "I'm too fat. You'll hurt yourself."

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"You're not fat, and there isn't much gravity here."

"I should lose ten pounds and you know it. Twenty would be better."

"You look great." It was difficult to keep his eyes on her face.

"Everybody looks great here. You look great, too."

"How did you know it was me? I didn't know you were in there until I heard your voice."

"I didn't, at first." She grinned. "I couldn't see you because Jim was in the way, and I didn't recognize your voice because you sound better here. It was just that you were a stranger, and maybe you'd protect me from him. He tore my clothes off, and I think I'm going to get a black eye."

By that time, Jim had picked up the flashlight and was trying to stand. March took it from him and hit him with it. Twice.

"Shove him out the door," Kit suggested.

March shook his head. "Not yet. I've got something to show you. If it's what I think it's going to be, I want him to see it, too. Hell, he's entitled to see it. Turn on that vid, will you? You can keep the sound off."

She did, and dancers as naked as Jim Redd capered across the projection area.

"I didn't know it was you," she told March, "until I saw the orange suit. The lights in here aren't very good."

"I've noticed, and I think I may understand that. Another thing I've noticed is that though whatever the Founder's got makes everybody else look different — "

"Better," Kit said.

"You look just the way you always did. You're still the most beautiful woman in the world."

"I look different, Windy, and you know it. You just won't admit it."

He shook his head. "You look exactly the same. You sound the same, too. When you couldn't see me, I couldn't see you, either. I heard your voice, and it was the most beautiful voice in the business. No different."

"I don't think I understand."

"Neither do I. That's how it was, and that's all I know." He was sweeping the room with his digicorder. When he finished, he found the remote and changed channels.

"Vid looks just the same as at home," Kit said. "I don't understand that either. Do you?"

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"If you mean how the system here does that, no. If you mean why it does it, it ought to be pretty obvious. The people get reminded of how it really was back home every time they look at it. This place is the carrot. What they see on vid is the stick. It's what they'll be going back to if they try to leave. So they don't. Wait a minute. Is there a hand-mirror around here?"

"Probably. I can look."

"Do that," March told her.

Redd groaned. After a minute or two, he groped the contusions on his head.

"Stay flat on the floor," March told him, "or you'll have another one." He had opened his suit and taken out his wallet.

Kit returned with a mirror. "You know, this is really a pretty place. It's not big, but it's awfully nice. Our watcher explained that the couple that had it before had gone back to Earth. The Founder'd sent them there, she said. They might come back eventually, but we could have it until they did. All this was before Jim jumped me."

March nodded.

"She said she'd go back to her gate and sleep there, but she'd come by for us in the morning. I thought I could handle Jim — that was a big mistake — and this looked nice. It would give us a base to operate out of while I looked for you and Jim looked for Robin. So I said okay, fine."

"You saw my lifeline."

"That's right. So we knew where you'd gone, Windy. Only it had been cut in front of the airlock, and that worried the hell out of me."

"The door did it," he said absently. "The airlock door. When you look into that mirror, do you see a new, improved you?"

"That's right, and I look great."

"Now look at this." March held up his wallet. "Which you is this?"

There was a long pause before Kit said, "That's the old me. This isn't real, is it? I never thought it was."

"But it was fun to pretend."

Kit nodded.

"Besides, philosophers have argued for centuries over what we mean by 'real' and what we ought to mean. When I look at you, the physical body I see is composed of atoms that form molecules. That's what it really is, but I see a person. Which one's real?"

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"Both of them," Kit said promptly.

"I agree, but not everyone does. I used to know a man whose wife cheated on him and bragged about it. He told himself it wasn't real because it didn't matter. What was real was the love he had for her, and the love he thought she had for him."

"I think I know him, too."

"Nothing mattered but that love, so only that love was real. It wasn't a lie he was telling himself, because he thought it was the truth. He'd convinced himself."

With an almost inaudible grunt, Redd sat up. Though still handsome, he looked sick; a few seconds later he spat onto the intricately beautiful Persian carpet.

March switched off his digicorder and took out the disk. "I want to play this. Let's see what we see."

What they saw first was a blue screen dotted with instructions and cautions printed in yellow. He pressed fast forward, stopped at a shot of Kit, and turned up the sound.

"No, Sarah. We'd like to hear about your cooking. It made you famous all over Southton."

The real Kit said, "That's the way, Windy. Hide those hips."

March hit fast forward again. "If only you knew what I feel every time I see them. Is Jim watching?"

He was, still sitting and looking only a little the worse for wear.

"Let's see if we can find Sue."

Robin appeared, simpering. Soon, March's voice said, *"You are. You're really quite beautiful."*

She laughed.

March's voice continued, *"Is it all right if I jump?"*

Kit asked, "Is that how she looked to you then?"

March shook his head and killed the sound. "She was lovely, and looked like nineteen or twenty. Did you notice the dolls behind her?"

"And the mess. There was a teddy bear, too."

"She wanted me to think she was a kid, twelve maybe, who looked older here. She tried to talk like that at first, but after a while she forgot and I noticed. She'd seen me coming, somehow, and gotten to the gate in time to talk the real kid into going out for coffee or something while Sue

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subbed for her. Presumably there's a place where you can watch like that, and Sue had found out about it fast, because she thought Jim here might come after her. So I came and was met by a gorgeous redhead who told me her name was Penny. Look at the screen."

It showed a vast cavern, with a floor of mud and water. Here and there grass struggled to live, its sallow blades ill-nourished by sunlamps high overhead.

"That isn't what I saw when I jumped," March said wryly. "It isn't even what I saw in the viewfinder. It's what the digicorder saw, just the same."

"You mean...?"

"I mean it's where we are. Right now."

Redd snarled, "You got me into this."

"If you're talking to me," March said, "I agree. I did. If you're talking to Kit, you and I are going to have words again."

"Without the flashlight?"

"Try it and see."

"That's what I want," Kit said. "I want to see. You were shooting when you came in here. I know you were. I want to see Jim and me, and I want to see what this place really looks like."

They did.

THE THREE OF THEM left together the next morning, after eating what they now knew was a paste of ground grain.

"I'm going to make you a deal," Redd told them. "Think you can outrun me? Either one of you?"

Kit shook her head, but March said, "I'd be willing to try. Want to find out?"

"In that suit?"

"You're a smoker, and I'm willing to try."

"You may get the chance. Look, I could just take off and look for Robin. When I found her — and I would — I'd take her to my hopper and we'd be back in New York before you knew we were gone. Capeesh?"

March nodded.

"That's got one big hole in it." Redd paused, looking thoughtful. "Are

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they going to let us go without a fight? Maybe they will. Maybe they won't."

"They won't," Kit said.

"I don't think so either," March told her, "but I'd like to hear your reason."

"Simple. We've seen through this place. They'll know we have, because nobody who hasn't would want to leave. If we get out we'll tell other people. So we don't get out."

Redd grinned. "Smart lady. How about you, March? You thinking the same as she is?"

"Close enough. What about you?"

"I'm not as sure as she is." Redd picked his teeth with a fingernail.

"But you think so, too. Why?"

"Everything's easier to get into than to get out of, that's all. You probably think I'm a goodfella."

March shook his head. "You were working as a sound man, so it didn't seem likely."

"That's right, I'm not. But I could've been a dozen times over. I'd be a made man by now. Or maybe dead, or in the slammer." Redd shrugged. "I know people, okay? Guys from my old neighborhood. Guys I went to school with. It was easy for most of them, and there was a couple who didn't even know where they were till somebody told them. You get in really easy, like here."

Kit said, "But you don't get out."

"Exactly. So I figure what I figure. They're sending people back to Earth, capeesh? She told us, and that's who had our shack before. For their health? I don't think so. They've got an angle."

"So do you," Kit told him.

"That's right. Mine is that we've got a better chance getting out together than doing it separately. I'll help you two, if you'll help Robin and me."

March said, "We will."

Kit looked from one to the other. "What if Robin doesn't want to go with him, Windy?"

"We'll deal with that after we've gotten out," March told her. "If we start fighting among ourselves now...." He shrugged.

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Redd opened a battered vacpack of Old Camels, looked into it, and reclosed it. "I'll deal now. Kit, if you'll give your word you'll take her back to the city and turn her loose, I'll give mine that I'll let you do it. That's unless she decides to come back with me and tells you so herself."

"It's a deal." Kit offered her hand.

"I want to know about the footrace," March told him.

"Just this. I'm splitting. Two of us will have a better chance of finding her than one. If you don't like it, you'll have to run me down."

"I like it," March told him. "You won't have to run."

"That's great. We'll meet you at the gate, okay? The gate you came in through. We came in through that one, too."

Kit added, "I saw your lifeline, Windy."

"That was Gate Four," March told Redd. "We'll wait a while there — if we can. You do the same. That doesn't mean we'll wait for days. An hour or two, tops."

Redd nodded and left, walking fast. They saw him stop where the path threaded a picture-perfect little grove to light a cigarette; then he was lost to sight.

Before the path vanished into the grove they turned aside, flanking the grove and a small but lovely lake. At last Kit said, "Don't you care whether Robin gets out?"

"Yes," March told her, "but not very much. They're not going to kill her in here. They'll keep her — drugged or whatever it is — and happy. She may be better off here than she'd be with Jim."

"You said you knew she wasn't really a kid because she forgot to talk like one. But you knew more than that, because you told us she was really Robin. Did she say so?"

"No. She slipped badly once and called me Marchy. That's what she used to call me...."

"I've got it."

"Mostly she called me Mr. Wildspring. You want to do dramatic parts, Kit, and I know you'll do them well. Do you know what the difference between a bad actor and a good actor is?"

"Charisma. You know it as soon as he comes on."

"That's what makes a star, but there are a lot of good actors who aren't stars and never will be. They're good just the same, and when you need

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somebody to play the other cop or the wisecracking gal who runs the deli they'll do fine. The difference between a bad actor and a good one is that a bad one can look good for five minutes. Give him a good director and a good script and he can handle it. But a good actor can be good for as long as you need him...."

"What is it, Windy?"

He raised his shoulders and, hopelessly, let them fall. "I don't want to talk about it."

Her embrace surprised him, and their kiss lasted a long time. When they parted, Kit said, "Now tell me about it. What are friends for?"

"Sometimes I wish I didn't notice so much, that's all."

They continued in silence until Kit dropped onto a marble bench. "This is about me and Jim, isn't it?"

March nodded.

"Okay, out with it."

"You said he tore your clothes off. They aren't torn, and there's not a button missing."

"Clothes look better here, too."

March said nothing.

"They do! Most of these people are in rags. You saw that when we played the disk. But those rags look great to us."

He turned his digicorder toward her and backed away. "We'll stop at the first house we see and look at this. If there are tears — or missing buttons, any of that — I'll apologize. What will you do when there aren't?"

"Windy...."

"Go ahead. I'm getting it."

"Windy, I love you. I do." Kit's tears overflowed as she spoke. "Do you really think I'd strip for Jim if I wasn't scared to death?"

"Yes. I'd like to be wrong about that. But yes, I do."

"Robin gave you a bad time." Kit fumbled for a handkerchief. "I uh-understand. I'd n-never really understood how b-bad it was till now, W-Windy...."

"Here." Turning off the digicorder, he brought her his.

She dried her eyes and blew her nose. "Don't say anything else, Windy. Okay? This is r-really pretty, even if it's n-not real. Let's just walk along and enjoy it for a while."

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They did, strolling down into a miniature valley and up again toward a spruce fieldstone cottage. The low gravity made walking very pleasant, reminding March that in Heaven a man could run and run and never tire. He had read that somewhere, although he could not remember where. As they stepped across a tinkling rill bordered with white and blue wildflowers, he began to whistle softly.

A handsome man of fifty or so was planting shrubs in front of the cottage. Kit asked him whether the path would lead them to the gate, and March added, "Gate Four. We're supposed to meet our friends there."

"I'm Hap Harper." Hap smiled, wiping his hands on the legs of his spotless overalls. "I won't ask you to shake — I'd get you dirty. But that's who I am. Used to work in a bank in Saginaw."

March and Kit introduced themselves.

"Well, this little road you're on won't take you to Gate Four if you follow it straight. You need to follow it up to the next crossroad, then turn left. Follow that one, and you'll come to a footbridge over a lake. Pretty soon after that, it'll fork. Take the left fork, and you'll be there before long. Like to step inside for some tea?"

Kit said, "We're in kind of a hurry."

March nodded. "We'll have to go soon, but I'd enjoy that tea. If it's not too much trouble."

"No trouble at all!"

They were ushered into a spotless home, somewhat larger than they might have guessed from its outward appearance, through living room and dining room and into a cheerful kitchen where rows of polished copper pans reflected onions and sausages dangling from the rafters.

"Mr. Wildspring's an independent digivid producer," Hap told a smiling, white-haired woman. "He and Ms. Carlsen here are shooting a documentary on this place."

"I'd love to see it," the woman said. She wiped her hand with a dishtowel and offered it to Kit. "You call me Ida, Ms. Carlsen. Didn't you used to do *Saturday Toy Shop*?"

Kit smiled. "It's Kit, Ida. Yes, I did. Three live-long seasons playing with puppies and talking to puppets. I'd a lot rather have talked to the puppies."

March said, "I noticed a vid in your living room, Ida. I'm March, by the

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way. I know it's an unusual name, but I was born in March and I'm afraid my parents found March Wildspring amusing."

Ida smiled. "I could tell you something about Hap's name. Maybe I will, later. Were you wondering whether we still watch?"

March nodded.

"Yes, we do. Not much, but sometimes."

"I can't show you our documentary as it will be shown on the net," March told her. "It doesn't exist yet. But I have a disk here that will show some of the images I took. It would be a pleasure to show you a few."

Hap said, "I'd like to see them."

"There are a couple things I ought to say first," March told him. "I suppose it will take five minutes or so."

Ida smiled again. "That's good. It will give me time to make tea. Tea must steep, you know."

"You've heard it said that somebody sees the world through rose-colored glasses," March began. "That can be true in the literal sense, of course. Glasses with a pink tint make just about everyone look prettier and healthier. I won't talk about the tricks photographers and cameramen use, or the things that can be done to digital images on a computer. I won't except to remind you of them, as I just did."

Kit said, "Is this smart, Windy? I'm not trying to be smart myself. I don't know and I want to."

March shrugged. "Love can do something like that, too. Self-love does it better than almost anything. I've been walking down the street and seen a big angry-looking guy with a beat-up face, and thought *he looks like trouble*. Two more steps, and I realized I was seeing my reflection in a shop window. When I look into a mirror, knowing it's a mirror, I don't look like that. Not to me, I don't."

Ida said, "Love lets us see the good in a person, the wonderful goodness that we pass over every day."

"That's true, and I can give you an interesting instance of it. I love Kit here, and I think she's beautiful. Absolutely beautiful, and I've told her that over and over. When I got here, everybody looked very, very good. You'll have noticed that yourself."

Hap and Ida nodded.

"When I saw Kit, she looked absolutely beautiful — but so did a

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woman named Sue, and some other women I'd seen. So I wondered about that. I wondered about her clothes, too, because they hadn't changed either. Kit looks great in everything she wears, and she looked great in these — in certain piece of underwear I saw, in the clothes she's wearing now, in everything. They looked good, too. Very good, but no different. They're a little wrinkled now, but I doubt that you've noticed it."

Hap said, "I certainly haven't."

"Naturally I wondered about that. Kit told me once that every woman has a figure flaw. Maybe more than one, but there's always at least one. They have character flaws, too, though she didn't say that. Kit's too generous and too trusting, for example. I love her for it, but it's a flaw and I know it."

Ida looked at March over the tops of glasses that she no longer had. "Are you saying men don't?"

He shook his head. "Men are the same. We're worse, if anything. You won't have noticed, but I'm as ugly as sin. I've got a lot of character flaws, too. One is that I think too much. Things get into my head and bug me, and I can't stop. I thought about how Kit looked here a whole lot last night and finally I got it."

Kit said, "Let's hear it, Windy."

"It's pretty simple, really. Whatever it is they've got here that tweaks your brain to make things look better couldn't tweak mine where Kit was concerned. It couldn't because it had been tweaked already, by love."

Ida smiled. "Good for you."

"Thanks. That got me to thinking how Kit looked in the digivid I'd shot. She looked just great, but she was the only one who did."

Kit said, "I've been wondering about that, too, Windy. Why doesn't it work when we see vid?"

March rubbed his jaw. "I think I've got that one. The vid I'd shot looked terrific. The framing was great, the colors were all there and all vibrant, and the lighting couldn't have been better. I've shot lots of vid and think I can do it just about as well as most cameramen, but that was the best ever. See what I'm saying?"

"The vid itself looked good, but the things in there — except for me."

"Bingo." March switched off his digicorder and removed the disk.

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"That was the preliminary. It may have taken a little longer than five minutes. If so, I apologize. I'll play some of this now."

Swaying a bit because the digicorder had been carried on a man's shoulder, a barren hill of earth and stones appeared before the vid. A shed stood at the top, a crazy affair of leaning metal props and naked particleboard. Before it, a skeletal man in rags labored with a piece of rusted steel, digging holes for shrubs whose burlap wrappings had burst, shrubs that were clearly dying or dead. Kit's voice, and March's, spoke to this starved and tattered figure. He rose with a grin that revealed stained and rotting teeth, and wiped his filthy hands on his muddy thighs. "I'm Hap Harper."

"You ruined their paradise," Kit told March when the cottage was no longer in view.

"You saw how they really looked."

"Yeah. Yeah, I did."

"How long until they die, if they stay here and keep on living the way they've been doing it?"

"A year, maybe. The tea she was making for us...."

"Was stagnant water polluted with human wastes. Sewage."

"She didn't see it that way."

"Neither did we," March said, "but that's what it was."

"Wouldn't they die? There ought to be a lot of dead people around here. Does somebody pick them up?"

"How would I know?" He rubbed his jaw. "I've seen people sleeping on the ground."

"I've seen some of those, too," Kit said a few seconds later.

"I never tried to wake any of them up."

The girl at Gate Number Four was called Nita. She looked younger than "Penny" had, and March suspected that she was really younger still.

"We have to go out and get some things." Kit had found her locker and pulled out her transparent suit. "I imagine we'll be back pretty soon."

Nita looked doubtful. "Nobody said anything about people leaving."

Kit smiled. "Because there's nothing to say, really. We get our suits and go into your airlock. That's all. You can wave good-bye if you feel like it. That would be nice."

"I'll have to work it. There aren't any controls on the inside. No

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handles or anything like that. It's why somebody has to be on the gate to let them in."

Kit looked puzzled. "That's a funny airlock."

"Keeps out the undesirables," March muttered. He had returned to the arch by which they had entered, and was scanning the sun-drenched landscape. "I know it rains in here at night. Does it ever thunder?"

Nita shook her head. "I don't think so."

Kit looked at him quizzically.

"I thought I heard thunder, that's all." He shut the worn orange suit. "I'd suit up if I were you. Put on your helmet."

"It won't rain where we are," Nita told them.

"It's people." Kit had cocked her head to listen. "A crowd. People yelling."

"I'd suit up, if I were you."

"Sure." She moved a doll and sat down to pull the transparent suit over her legs. "They sound mad."

"Get your helmet on," March told her. "We'd better go."

"We told Jim we'd wait."

"To hell with Jim."

Two figures — one dark, the other scarlet against the bright green grass — topped the nearest of the low hills. They were running, bounding with long, rather ineffective strides. As March watched, the dark figure stopped to look back at the scarlet one. There was a distant shout — of what, he could not be sure.

He switched on his digicorder. Someone far away was beating a drum — a drum bigger than the biggest he had ever heard.

A dull, dead-sounding drum that could be beaten only by a giant.

"Windy...?"

"Get into the airlock quick." He spoke to Kit without looking at her.

"That's trouble, isn't it?"

"Get in there."

The scarlet figure had fallen, and the dark one was helping it — her — up. March's fingers fumbled with the carabiner that fastened his flashlight to his utility belt.

The drum beat louder as the mob crested the hill.

And the dark figure turned to face it. The flashes were invisible, as was

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the powder smoke. The sounds of the shots reached them only weakly, scattered among drumbeats: six, seven, eight.... March found he was counting them, although he had never chosen to do so.

Eleven, twelve.... Some semi-automatics held fifteen rounds. Some even more.

Beside him Kit said, "That's Jim, isn't it? My God! Look how scared Robin is."

"Get in the airlock!" March shouted.

Then he was running, although he had not consciously chosen to do that, either. The mob had halted, dismayed by its dead.

Fourteen, fifteen....

Robin had fallen and was scrambling to her feet as he reached her. Snatching her wrist, he jerked her up, threw her over his shoulder, and ran for all he was worth.

Her shriek might have stopped him. Kit's certainly did. He whirled — and beheld the impossible.

A giant the color of Ida's copper pots was cresting the hill. The men and women in the mob were as children in comparison, and small children at that. They tried to part before it and failed. Eight or ten died beneath its feet.

March fled and did not stop running until he and Robin had mounted to the false room that was the air lock. Outside, Kit shouted, "That girl! Nita! Windy, she's gone!"

"I'll get it!" Robin darted away. For a half second that was to prove much too long March stood motionless, gasping for breath. When he moved again, the room wall that was in fact the hatch of the airlock was slamming shut and Kit was dashing toward him. He saw it catch her above the knees, saw her fall, and watched her cut in two.

SPACE SEEMED WARM and welcoming when he jetted away from Number Nineteen; the Sun's tiny candle, five hundred million miles away, spoke of Earth and home.

He matched the speed of his hopper to that of the Asteroid Belt before he stopped hopping. It might be — indeed, it seemed likely — that he would be pursued. If so, the thronging asteroids would make it

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impossible to locate his hopper by radar. He would be far safer than in all the empty immensity between the Belt and Mars or that between Mars and Earth.

Only then did he stop to review the disk from his digicorder.

"Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to your protection, implored your help, or sought your intercession was left unaided. Inspired with this — Inspired with this...."

It was coming back, no question about it. "Seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened for you."

Something like that.

He rubbed his jaw. When Bad Bill turned him down, as Bad Bill presumably would, he would be free to sell to Pubnet or Vidnet — but only if they paid the price UDN had refused or more. That argued for offering it to Bad Bill cheaply, say two million or less.

On the other hand, Bad Bill was entirely capable of buying it and sitting on it if the price were low enough. There would be some threshold at which Bad Bill would not dare, at which it would eat up too much of his budget. The trick would be to offer it just above that.

When he finished it at last — an Ethermail to William W. Williams, VP Programming, UDN, with a brief description of what he had — the price he put on it was five million. He might, he just might, get that much from Pubnet or one of the others. That much or more. He would start with them at six million five.

He pushed the Send button, muttered, "Holy Mother help me," and began to prepare his lunch. Number Nineteen's people might have Kit's hopper by now, with its multitude of cookbooks and obscure spices. Or if not by now, then soon. What would they do with them?

Kit had not gone into the airlock, this although he had told her to repeatedly. Her reason for disobeying was plain: she had wanted to be with him, to share his risks.

"A woman should not share a man's risks," he muttered as he shut the door of his microwave. "It's not what women are for."

Try telling that to a woman.

Jesus had refused to let his mother in to see him. He had known the

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fate awaiting him, and had known the risk the apostles ran. He had wanted to spare his mother that risk. Or (March thought as the microwave beeped) to spare her as much of it as could.

When he had finished eating, he found that he had Ethermail.

"Mr. Wildspring. Please icom me asap. Calling from space is expensive, so call collect: USA 1105 8129-4092-6 X7798. Kim Granby, Special Assistant, Programming." White print on a blue background confirmed that the message was from United Digital Network.

March jotted down the number and called it. Collect.

Kim Granby looked about twenty-five, although he knew she was almost certainly at least ten years older. Sleek black hair framed a smooth oval face. "Thank God!" she said. "I was afraid you wouldn't call till tomorrow. I've looked at your material — some of it, not all of it yet. It's good. It's very, very good."

It sounded like a build-up to a let down. UDN was going to refuse, and he could offer his work elsewhere. An expert poker player, he repressed all traces of a smile. "It's rough, of course. A few of the voiceovers are Kit Carlsen's, and I think you'll want to keep them. The rest are mine. All of those will have to be redone, and you'll want to edit everything. I think I said that."

"You did." Kim Granby gave him a guarded smile. "I haven't watched all of it yet — less than half in fact. But I told the vice president what it was and what I'd seen, and we want to buy it."

March cursed inwardly.

"Before we make an offer, I have some questions. You weren't alone in this. Kit Carlsen did voiceovers for you, and she was in some of the footage I saw. Your Ethermail sounded as if you own all rights. Do you?"

He nodded. "May I explain?"

"Please do."

"A lot of it was shot solo by me. At the end we had a four-person crew. Kit, Jim and Robin Redd, and me. All of us had worked for UDN at one time or another. Did you know Kit or Robin? Or Jim?"

"I've met Ms. Carlsen once or twice." The guarded smile came again. "Once at least. She's no longer with you?"

"She's dead."

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Kim Ganby's mouth opened, and closed again.

"Kit's dead, Jim's dead, and Robin's probably dead, too. I don't know for sure about Robin, but you'll see Jim...."

"See him die?"

"Yes. I didn't see it myself. I had the digicorder, but I wasn't watching the viewfinder just then. It's on the disk though. In the digital copy I sent you. He was squashed. Crushed sounds better, I suppose. Kit's dead, too."

There was a long pause. At last Kim Granby said, "I liked her."

March nodded. "So did I."

"You said this man Jim's death was in the footage. Didn't you? Didn't I hear that?"

March nodded again.

"What about Ms. Carlsen?"

"It's there. She was cut in two."

Another pause. "You're joking."

March shook his head. "I wish I was."

"And it's there, in... I — I'm going to have to talk to Mr. Inglis. I'll call you right back."

"Wait up!" March raised his hand. "What's this about Mr. Inglis? I thought I was dealing with Bill Williams. Is this Phil Inglis?"

"Correct. Mr. Williams has left the net to pursue other interests." Kim Granby's beautiful face held no expression. "Mr. Inglis is Vice President for Programming now."

"I know him."

"I know you do, Mr. Wildspring. He called you an old friend. I have to speak with him just the same."

"All right. Will you call me back?"

Abruptly, the beautiful face softened. "Pubnet's at work on a special rather like 'Vaults in the Void,' Mister — may I call you March?"

He wanted to rub his jaw, but did not. "Certainly, Ms. Granby." One second served to collect his thoughts, though he wished he had longer. "I'd like it."

"Call me Kim, please. Everyone does. And I'll call you back. You can count on that, March. It won't be long. Good-bye for now."

Kit was dead. It was just beginning to sink in. He turned away from the blank screen. He had thought that he had come to terms with that. He

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had not. His hands were shaking. He thrust them angrily into his pockets, knowing that nothing he could do would make them stop.

Kit was dead and Jim was dead and Sue was probably dead by now; Earth was menaced by something a dead man had turned loose on mankind; but all those were overshadowed by the single, salient, inescapable fact of Kit's death.

If there had been whiskey on his hopper, he would have poured himself a drink — would have been drunk, in all probability, by the time UDN called him back. Not for the first time, he was glad there was none.

Kit was dead.

Her soul was with God, somewhere out there in space. Someday his soul might meet hers there. They would embrace, and laugh at remembered things, and link arms forever.

Someday....

"Remember, O most gracious Virgin...."

"I should preface this," Kim Granby said, "by telling you that Pubnet's at work on something very similar. Have I said so already? Mr. Inglis said I was to tell you. He felt, in fairness, that you should know."

March nodded. "Please tell him how much I appreciate it."

"It's nothing like as sensational as yours," Kim Granby continued. "He didn't say to tell you that. I'm doing it on my own, but I feel he would approve."

"It's good of you."

She smiled. "I'll be good some more. I'll tell you that Mr. Inglis and I have watched everything you sent us now. We watched it together, in fact. We recorded notes as we watch. Both of us did that."

"I understand."

"I've returned with an offer. As I said." She stopped to draw breath, something she did very attractively. "When I realized what you had, March, I knew I had to go back to Mr. Inglis. What if I had given you his offer, and you had refused it? I explained to him, and he indicated that I had acted correctly. There is a new offer now. If you'd like time to think it over, please let me know."

"I will." March nodded. "But I'll have to hear it first."

"Of course. Yes, indeed. Certainly." Her sudden smile would have

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melted a heart far harder than his. "You're a gentleman. I've talked with some of the other women here. At — we go for coffee. Together. You know."

Wondering what was coming, he nodded again.

"They said you were rough, tough and blunt. Then Debbie Knowles said the three musketeers would've welcomed you with open arms, and all the rest agreed. So I just wanted to say — this is from me, personally, not from the net. I wanted to say that whether or not you accept our offer, I hope we can be friends. Is that all right?"

"Yes," March said, "absolutely."

"I live here in New York...?"

"So do I," March said.

"That's good. That's very good. This is official now. This is what Mr. Inglis said. We'll pay...."

March had raised his hand. "You're being very honest with me, Kim, and I appreciate it. I want to be honest with you, too. I told you a lie when we spoke earlier. I didn't mean to, but I did. May I set the record straight?"

Kim Granby's nod was scarcely one tenth of an inch, but it was there.

"I said that I liked Kit. The truth is that I loved her. I loved Kit very much. You're bound to hear it soon from somebody, so I want to tell you. I loved her, and I watched her die. I don't want you to think, later, that I've been hiding it from you."

"I would never think that, March. Never!" Another deep breath. "You get angry and upset when a woman cries, don't you?"

"Pretty often, yes."

"Then let me off quick, because I think I may cry. We're making two offers. The first is flat, without any conditions. Eight million five hundred thousand. The second is contingent on your coming back to work for UDN. You'd be a senior producer, pay half a mil. Residuals and bonuses. You know. Do that, and the offer's ten mil. Do you want more time?"

He shook his head. "Tell Phil I'll take the second."

Kit, he understood. He thought he understood Jim, too. Jim had loved Sue — no, had loved Robin. Jim had loved Robin and Jim and been a bastard in certain ways. All men were bastards in certain ways, so why not Jim? Jim had understood Robin better than he, March, ever had.

Better than he, March, ever would.

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He remembered the small dark figure. The pop-pop-pop of the distant shots. Jim had stood his ground, shooting, until he died, hoping to gain time for Robin.

But what about Robin? What about the woman he had tried so hard to forget? March rubbed his jaw. It seemed inadequate, so he rubbed it again.

Had Robin wanted to die with Jim?

Or had she been willing to sacrifice herself to save his — March's — life?

Or had she simply wanted to remain in Number Nineteen? She had never seen what the digicorder showed, after all. He went to the window and stared out at the tiny blue spark that was home, so remote and so easy to reach, so blessed with grace and so cursed with evil. Had Robin been willing to sacrifice herself? For him?

There was only one way to find out, and that was go back and find her — assuming she was still alive.

And ask.

GONE TO JUPITER

The Memories and Menace of Memorials in Space

Produced and Directed by March Wildspring

Starring Kit Carlsen

With voiceovers by Kit Carleson,
Tabbi Merce, and Vincent Palma

Edited by March Wildspring
and Robin Redd Wildspring

Dedicated to Kit Carlsen
and James Frankie Redd,
Who Perished that You Might Watch It

A Philip J. Inglis Presentation

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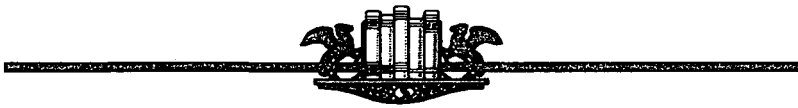

THE WOLF IN THE LABYRINTH

MICHAEL SWANWICK

ALL FICTION is lies, of course. But the best fictions tell *useful* lies, ones that help us make sense of an often confusing world. The congressman and frontier yarn-spinner Davy Crockett claimed to know of a buffalo so large that it took three men to see all of it. Gene Wolfe is something like that wonderful buffalo. His virtues as a writer are so great and so many that a recitation of them tends to make him blend into the sky.

Here's the short version: Wolfe is so extremely smart that he stands out even in a field that routinely attracts savants, autodidacts, brilliant loners, and wild talents; he writes both novels and short fiction with complete mastery; he's endlessly inventive and endlessly surprising; he fills his works with what programmers call "Easter eggs," puzzles and secret treats for those who care to fossick them out; he dares to take chances; his writing covers an astonishing range of subjects and styles; he creates people you care about; his research is meticulous and his facts reliable; he has the slyest sense of humor imaginable; and his prose is as good as prose gets. Plus, he's prolific. To be prolific at any level is to be beloved of God. But to be prolific and write like Gene Wolfe does is to be one of the Elect.

You see? I've left you with no picture at all of the man or of his work. Worse, I'm treading on the edge of the great fallacy that Wolfe's admirers so often fall into: That of making him sound so elevated that there's no hope of a mere mortal enjoying his work. It's an easy mistake to make, though. Cresheim Creek, near where I live, flows into the Wissahickon creating a deep spot that's called the Devil's Pool because, so the folklore goes, it has no bottom but goes all the way down to the devil. A Gene Wolfe story can be like that—even the seemingly simplest can

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turn out to be potentially bottomless.

Take "A Solar Labyrinth," first published in this magazine in 1983, which at first glance seems barely more than a whimsy. A Mr. Smith builds a labyrinth of isolated objects — lamp posts, statues, a retired yawl canted on its side with masts jutting overhead — scattered about a lawn, so that the walls defining its passages are not physical but shadows. It's a puzzle that can only be solved, moreover, by realizing that the shadows shift with the sun, opening and closing lines of escape. The vignette explores the differing reactions of adults and children to the maze and ends with Mr. Smith and one solitary child chasing each other down its lanes in the waning afternoon.

Lovely, I thought on first reading it. But later, looking back over my metaphorical shoulder, I felt the shadows lengthen and darken. The imagined shrieks of the child sounded less like laughter and more like terror. I could not help but think of Lewis Carroll, who was from one perspective the best friend a child could ever have, and from another a very frightening man indeed. I could not help but think that the child's predicament was a lot like life itself.

From this point, the analysis can go on and on. Google the story and you'll find that many think it's a Christian allegory, while others prefer to interpret it as a key to the reading of Wolfe's masterwork, *The Book of the New Sun*. For those who care to do so, the exploration can be followed as deep as human ingenuity will take it. Gene Wolfe is notorious for never explaining his stories, so there's no telling at what point interpretation ends and invention begins. A lot of people have gone to the devil, trying to track this particular wolf through the labyrinth of story and back to its lair.

There's nothing wrong with the critical impulse, of course. But it's a very big mistake to think that simply because a story has deeper levels, its surface meaning can be ignored with impunity.

I'm thinking here of the response to Wolfe's recent novel *The Wizard Knight* (for reasons of length, lightly revised and published as *The Knight* and *The Wizard*) in which a teenaged boy finds himself transported to a beleaguered fantasy world and into the body of a physically powerful adult, and in convincingly short order makes himself into the perfect knight. The world creation is a brilliant

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conflation of Norse mythology and Christian medieval theology, with just a touch of Relativity thrown in for seasoning. Many readers have gone haring up and down the levels of invented reality, gleefully identifying sources and hidden implications, while completely ignoring the central concern of the novel. Which is: What qualities make somebody a good knight? This is an interesting question even before you've given it serious thought. But by the time Wolfe is done examining and expanding upon it, it's revealed as one that has serious applications for how you and I should lead our lives. *The Wizard Knight* is one of Wolfe's wisest books, and one I know I'll return to often.

Some time ago, in a short essay titled, with disarming modesty, "What I Know About Writing (in no particular order)," Wolfe wrote that "Almost any interesting work of art comes close to saying the opposite of what it really says." Which is almost a Zen koan in how straightforwardly it can be stated and yet how complex it is in application. But it helps to remember that Wolfe is a practicing Catholic, and that to a Catholic all human beings are engaged in an ongoing struggle for salvation. There is good in the worst of us and evil in the best, and nobody knows which side will land uppermost when the final coin is tossed. Which can make Wolfe's characters unnerving in the way that real people are unnerving, and unpredictable in the way that all good literature confounds our expectations. There are no heroes who can be trusted unequivocally, no villains beyond redemption, and nine times out of ten, the difference between a tragedy and a comedy is crucial but slight and occurs in the final pages.

For those who are still feeling intimidated (and, looking back, I see that I haven't done a very good job of allaying your fears), all of the above can be boiled down to three simple rules for enjoying his work:

1. Look for hidden implications.
2. Remember Poe's purloined letter, and pay serious attention to the obvious.
3. Never forget that people are human.

"Memorare," in this issue, is a good example of everything I've said so far. The surface story, sufficient in itself, is an extremely good science fiction adventure. Note the careful engineering of the suits and cenotaphs. Note the craftsmanship. Nearing the end I thought for *sure*

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there was no way Wolfe could wrap it all up satisfactorily in the little space left. But of course he did.

So read the story first for the excitement of the ride. Then, if that's your bent, you can look deeper. I personally think (but you should be aware that I have a long history of creating clever theories that turn out to be wrong, so take this one with a grain of salt) that on a symbolic level Kit and Redd and even Kim, who pops up near the end, are all aspects of the same woman, so that the entire history of March's marriage is folded through the story. Fiction can do that, you know. There's nothing that says it has to limit itself to a literal reading of what's on the page. But you don't have to accept my version of what's going on. Wolfe always leaves room for multiple interpretations in his work. Feel free to roll your own.

Or don't, if that sort of thing gives you the pip. But you should definitely reflect on the moral significance of the story. I don't mean that it has a "moral," a tidy little platitude that you can reduce it to and maybe embroider on your handkerchief. Wolfe is too good a writer for that. But almost all serious fiction is about how we human beings live and, if only by implication, how we ought to live. When a story is titled "Memorare" (I suggest you look up the prayer to see what Wolfe left out) and is played out pretty much literally in the shadow of the grave, you know that it's not about trivial matters.

A minute ago, I reduced this essay to three rules for appreciating Wolfe. But if I had to boil it all down yet further, into a single guideline, it would be: Most of all, have fun. Disgruntled writers confronted by a bad review are fond of quoting Georg Christoph Lichtenberg's aphorism that "A book is like a mirror; if an ass peers into it, you can't expect an apostle to peer out." But the reverse is true as well. If you're a good reader, as I presume you are, sometimes the image that peers murkily from a badly written story is unworthy of you. It as good as calls you an ass. Which insult, thrown in your face when you expect it least, is where the anger comes from when you find yourself flinging a book or magazine at the wall. But you don't have to fear that here. You're in good hands with Gene Wolfe.

He tells the very *best* lies.

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GENE WOLFE: THE MAN AND HIS WORK

MICHAEL ANDRE-DRIUSSI

JOHN CLUTE has called him "quite possibly the most important" author in the contemporary sf field. Ursula K. Le Guin has called him "our Melville." Michael Swanwick has called him the greatest living writer in the English language. Who is this mild-mannered man named Gene Wolfe, and how has he won these accolades?

Through a lot of hard work, it turns out.

Gene Wolfe came to writing after returning home from the Korean War (1954), completing his college education at the University of Houston, and getting married in 1956[1].

Looking for a way to supplement his salary as an engineer at Procter & Gamble in Cincinnati, the twenty-six-year-old newlywed began writing stories in whatever free time he could find.

His first sale came eight years later, in 1965.

To put this into perspective, at that point he had three children (of an eventual four), with the eldest already in second grade. That's a long time in "parent years."

His first novel was published in 1970, and since then he has written twenty-three more, some of them singletons, most of them set in one of several series (*The Book of the New Sun, The Book of the Long Sun, The Book of the Short Sun, The Wizard Knight*, and the *Soldier* series). His novels have won awards: the Nebula, World Fantasy Awards, Locus Awards, British awards, among others. Although he is primarily a novelist, Gene Wolfe has never abandoned the writing of shorter works and he has seen more than 210 of them published.

His stories cover a broad spectrum of science fiction and fantasy,

[1] Gene and his wife's fiftieth anniversary was in November — congratulations, Rosemary and Gene!

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ranging from high-brow literary puzzles to low-brow tabloid realism, with several odd tangents in between. He has a knack for taking a genre staple and turning it on its head. For example, an early space adventure titled "Alien Stones" (collected in *The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories*) in which the starship's empath thinks like a child and the rugged captain can solve the first-contact mystery only by thinking like an engineer, seems like a topsy-turvy version of *Star Trek*.

There's some Horror, there's some Mystery, and there's some Humor. Looking across it all, certain trends become apparent in each of four decades: the seventies, the eighties, the nineties, and the present.

The Seventies: Literary Tricks

This is a trick question, but an easy one.

—Number Five

Gene Wolfe first gained attention in the 1970s through two different series of linked stories: the three novellas of *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* and the "Island" stories. His technique was to take an initial story, shift it dramatically for a second story, and then shift it again for a third story. This literary gambit paid off handsomely: the second "Island" story, "The Death of Doctor Island," won both a Nebula and a *Locus* award.

In 1972 Wolfe left Procter & Gamble to become a senior editor at *Plant Engineering*, a trade journal located in Barrington, Illinois (a job he would stay with until he became a full-time writer in 1984). That year also saw the publication of *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* (1972). Set on the distant twin-worlds of Sainte Anne and Sainte Croix, these three novellas appear to be sequels sharing a common location, timeframe, and characters. Yet below this surface the reality is shifting from story to story.

The first novella, titled "The Fifth Head of Cerberus," is the memoir of an established citizen looking back with a certain Proustian tone — it is the coming-of-age story of a young man searching for identity in a baroque world of clones, shape-shifting aliens, and hybrids. His planet, Sainte Croix, while the more developed of the twin worlds, is still something of a backwater. The general technology is nineteenth century, complete with slavery, and yet his scientist

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father uses profits from his brothel to conduct experiments in genetic engineering.

The second novella is "'A Story,' by John V. Marsch," written by an anthropologist from Earth who is a minor character in the first novella. The story reads like an anthropological reconstruction of the shape-shifting aliens and their world, Sainte Anne, as it existed before the humans came. It is a gripping coming-of-age story about a young man in a stone-age tribal society who visits other tribes who seem at times to be as fantastic as fairies, goblins, and trolls. There is an implied tension between the anthropology and the recreation of a lost culture so strange as to seem a total fantasy — that is, between science and fiction. How much of the story is real, and "real" to what degree? How much of the story is a projection of the anthropologist's life and/or dreams?

The third novella, enigmatically titled "V.R.T.," reveals that the "John V. Marsch" who wrote the previous story is a political prisoner held by a corrupt and authoritarian regime. He might be insane. He might not be a real anthropologist. He might not even be from Earth. The text itself is a hodgepodge of taped interrogations, snippets from his journal, scribbled notes, and the everyday distractions of the officer reviewing his case.

These novellas together form a dazzling, multifaceted whole that is much more than the sum of its parts. It was considered Wolfe's major work until the arrival of *The Book of the New Sun.*

Wolfe wrote a second linked-story series (starting before *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, yet finishing after it), this time revolving in a free-wheeling style around three words: Island, Doctor, and Death. (These three stories are collected in *The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories and Other Stories.* A fourth one appeared in the eighties, but that's another decade.)

In "The Island of Doctor Death and Other Stories" (1970), a lonely young boy lives with his mother at an isolated house on the coast, a house sometimes surrounded by water at high tide. His mother has two suitors: one a man her own age who drives a sports car, and the other an older physician. The woman is addicted to drugs, but the boy is addicted to genre fiction to a degree that might be worse: he identifies with the first suitor as a flashy, heroic character and thinks of the other man as "Doctor Death." As reality begins to break down, the

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story partakes of the "psychological thriller" or "magical realism" schools of fiction, depending upon reader interpretation.

Some years later came "The Death of Doctor Island" (1978), in which a psychologically disturbed teenage boy seems to be on a tropical island, but the place is actually an orbital mental institution run by a computer, and there are other patients who are, perhaps, more important. This time the boy is inside of a love triangle, rather than just observing. What follows is a tug of war between reality and illusion in the gray area between torture and treatment, through what might be high tech "magic" performed by Doctor Island or simply the boy's hallucinations.

The third story is "The Doctor of Death Island" (1978). Its hero is Alan Alvard, inventor of speaking books, who is in prison for killing his business partner to keep control of his singular invention. He works as an orderly in the prison hospital where there is an old doctor with a terminal ward at the seventh floor — Alvard thinks of this ward as Death Island, the tip of a submerged mountain that is the rest of the hospital, and has recurring nightmares about the doctor coming for him.

Two years into his sentence, Alvard develops stomach cancer, so he is put into experimental cryogenic suspension. Forty years later he is awakened and cured, only to find himself in a future where everybody has immortality and he is still serving a life sentence. He discovers that the government has stolen his patents in the interests of its own security (a different sort of "national security"), but in his secret and methodical way he devises an elaborate plan for escape that involves bringing fictitious characters of Charles Dickens to life. The love triangle is tangled, complicated, and submerged, yet still at the mysterious heart of the story. Here the mature hero is active in fighting for his escape from the "Island," but at the cost of making him less sympathetic than the boys of the previous stories.

Wolfe was known in the seventies for such highly structured literary tricks. He hasn't stopped, really, since he does that with novels, but in shorter works after the seventies he often uses art to conceal art.

The Eighties: Deepening Horror

Neal and Ted held her, and Jan put the sword through her belly —

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so she'd live long enough to know what was happening.

— Ming

It is a paradox that Gene Wolfe is not a horror writer and yet his stories very often have a strong thread of horror to them. In the early 1970s this horror was kept a step removed from the reader by narrative distance, which made the horror more cerebral, intellectual, or even philosophical. During the late seventies and through the eighties, Wolfe closed this gap, producing horror that is immediate, visceral, and gruesome.

"Silhouette" (1975, collected in *Endangered Species*) presents a starship in orbit around an Earth-like planet after a very long search from a ruined Earth. The captain wants to declare it ready for human colonization as soon as possible, and she is intolerant of dissenting opinion. Officer Johann has misgivings about the world, but he also seems to be in some sort of dream-like first-contact with something down on the surface, a non-corporeal being that is a shadow and uses darkness. When hints of his strange condition spread through the ship, secret cults emerge from hiding in the hope of starting a new religion. The story takes on a frightening and ambiguous demonology within the context of a *Star Trek*-like space adventure.

"When I Was Ming the Merciless" (1976, collected in *Endangered Species*) is one side of a dialogue between a college student and his jailors. The contrast between the whimsical title and the opening scene is stark, and while a monologue might seem "distancing," in this example it actually destroys distance.

"Redbeard" (1984, collected in *Storeys from the Old Hotel*) is a conversational story about a local man with a bad reputation in rural Illinois. This haunting tale touches on fairy tales at points and zigs when you think it will zag.

"Lord of the Land" (1990, collected in *Starwater Strains*) gives us Dr. Sam Cooper, an "Indy Jones" of folklore, visiting rural Tennessee to investigate a local legend about an unusual monster called a "soul-sucker" that a trio of shooters hit at twilight. Dr. Cooper spends the night at his informant's old farmhouse and discovers a Faulknerian dynamic to the family, but as the night deepens he is drawn across time and place to face the sort of cosmic horror that would make Lovecraft proud.

While horror has always had a

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place in Wolfe's work, during this period a visceral horror burst out, expanding the range and engaging the reader in new ways.

The Nineties: Blazing Emotional Core

I'd like to eat the hippos.
— Rex

During the nineties, Wolfe's short fiction developed a noir, almost hardboiled style, yet the emotional content was paradoxically more direct rather than being downplayed in tough-guy attitudes or cold intellect.

"The Ziggurat" (1995, collected in *Strange Travelers*) has a retired engineer going through an ugly divorce. Like a Hemingway hero he has been holed up in a remote cabin for several months, where his progress at taming a coyote has prevented him from committing suicide with a rifle. He feels used up and on the verge of being discarded, but when his wife arrives, expecting him to sign the divorce papers, he rises up with a new determination to refuse the divorce and save the marriage. When she tries to leave in her car she is assaulted by a bunch of boy-sized aggressors who make off with one of the children. The hero sets out to find her in the falling snow, and down by the lake he meets the fey alien creatures that have abducted her. It is solid science fiction, with elements of horror and fantasy, and traces of tabloid realism.

"Petting Zoo" (1997, collected in *Strange Travelers*) is perhaps Wolfe's most humorous story. A man stands in line at a children's zoo to get a ride on a most unnatural creature — a genetically re-engineered Tyrannosaurus Rex, with purple skin. Built by a boy, once, long ago. This story somehow expresses the manic energy of a "Calvin and Hobbes" comic strip merged with a welcome jab against Barney the dinosaur, and has always seemed to me to be a perfect candidate for a Pixar animated short.

"The Walking Sticks" (1999, collected in *Innocents Aboard*) is tabloid-realism written in a folksy confessional style. (But art conceals art: it is really a crypto-literary story!) The working-class narrator receives a large crate sent from England to his ex-wife, whose current location is unknown. He and his new wife open the crate to find a cabinet filled with a collection of twenty-two unique canes. They are haunted, it seems, and at times they

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go out on their own to commit mayhem and murder.

Following the rising tide of horror in Wolfe's work during the eighties, the nineties marked an upsurge of powerful emotions from the heart as well as from the spleen.

The Millennium: Wolfe at Work

Tom flourished his stick, hearing Nero roar behind him and knowing that if even one other cat became involved it was all over.

—"On a Vacant Face a Briuse"

So far this decade, Wolfe's work continues to show its customary variety, with a renewed interest in dreams and nightmares. Earlier stories involving dreams include "Forlesen" (1974, collected in *Castle of Days*), "To the Dark Tower Came" (1977, collected in *Storeys from the Old Hotel*), and "The Detective of Dreams" (1980, collected in *Endangered Species*).

"Hunter Lake" (2003, collected in *Starwater Strains*) is a dream that teeters on the verge of nightmare. The dreamer is Ettie, a woman who returns to a time and place when she was a teen living with her mother Susan. Susan wants to visit the haunted Hunter Lake so she can write a magazine article, but Ettie has premonitions (or perhaps memories) about the lake and she drags her feet. Following the logic of dreams, different eras are collapsed into a strange "present time." The story is a ghost story, a girls' mystery, a spirit quest, and a puzzler touching on mothers and daughters.

Strange Birds (2006), published by Dreamhaven, is a chapbook of two stories inspired by the haunting art of Lisa Snellings-Clark. The first story, "On a Vacant Face a Bruise," is an interstellar circus story that might be in the same universe as Urth and addresses the archetypal dream of "running away to join the circus." It shares affinities with "The Toy Theater" (1971, collected in *The Island of Doctor Death...*) and "No Planets Strike" (1997, collected in *Strange Travelers*), and I wonder if I'm alone in detecting a bit of Fellini's *La Strada* in there as well.

The other story, "Sob in the Silence," is the creepiest story Wolfe has written to date, and that is really saying something.

We are like children who look at print and see a serpent in the last letter but one, and a sword in the last.

— Severian

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This, then, is Gene Wolfe — an engineer who transmuted himself into an alchemist through literary tricks in the seventies, summoned flesh-crawling horrors in the eighties, worked wild passions like an animal trainer in the nineties, and who currently distills the dream-world for the entertainment and edification of readers everywhere.

But don't read him just because he is "good for you," read him because he is the best in the world, or, even better, because you like to.

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When last we heard from Mr. Gerrold (as printed in the Jan. 2007 issue), Mr. G. was very vague about his whereabouts, perhaps with good reason. Many people were concerned, especially those of us who were hoping to get passes to the premiere of the film adaptation of The Martian Child. *Fortunately, our worries have been allayed by this missive:*

The Equally Strange Reappearance of David Gerrold

By David Gerrold

DEAR GORDON,

I got home late last night to find a stack of frantic e-mails from you and a dozen other people. When I finally recharged my cell phone, there were thirty voice messages and at least that number of text messages.

I'm very, very sorry, Gordon. I apologize profusely for worrying you and everybody else. I don't know how I'll ever make amends, but I'll do my best. The only thing I can think to say is that I must have been in a very weird state of mind when I wrote that...well, whatever it was I wrote. Maybe I should excuse it by saying that when I wrote it I was off my meds, except I'm not on any meds. Well, maybe I should be. Something like Lithium or Prozac or one of those mood-altering substances that would let me walk around with a glassy detached expression of unfocused contentment. Whatever.

So here's what happened.

Nothing.

We went out searching for the legendary green people of the

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northwest and we found nothing at all. Well, not quite nothing. But mostly nothing.

I told you about my friends Dennis and Jay (not their real names) who put me in touch with some other people, who finally put me in touch with some people willing to go back and take a look at the area with me. Professional greenie-chasers, I guess you could call them. Like those folks who go out looking for Sasquatch and D. B. Cooper's lost loot. So, that's how I found myself headed back south in a rented van with three guys I'd just met, and about whom I was already having my usual paranoid doubts. The driver barely said a word the whole trip, he had a beard, and he wore sunglasses and a knit beanie, and one of those silly utility kilts you see grown men with beards wearing at sf conventions, so the only thing I can really say about him is that he had exceptionally unattractive hairy legs. Other than that, underneath all that, he could have been anyone, even the legendary Emmett Grogan. The other two — well, that's another short novel.

I'll call them Bert and Ernie, not their real names — but still a pretty good indicator of their personalities. Bert is large and bear-shaped, and almost as hairy. (I guess nobody in the northwest does "manscaping." That must be a Bravo channel phenomenon.) He's fueled mostly by beer and he's appropriately keg-shaped; at first glance you might think this guy is all fat — I made that mistake, but there's a lot of muscle under that bulk. He's also very hirsute (I've always wanted to use that word in a story). His long hair is starting to show gray, and it's parted in the middle; not a good look for him, but I doubt he cares. His beard reaches mid-chest; it's also going gray. In personality, he has an H. L. Mencken sensibility, but without the anti-Semitism. He's an equal opportunity cynic; not bitter, just skeptical of everything, even with proof. Why he believes in the green people of the northwest enough to go on a snipe hunt like this remains an unanswered question, but his determination kept us going for the full five days.

Ernie, on the other hand, is tall and lanky. He didn't look like he had enough meat on his bones to be a decent meal for the buzzards that might end up picking at our corpses; but he remained indefatigable and he carried a backpack nearly half his weight, filled with some of the most remarkable surprises. Ernie is also a wealth of astonishingly esoteric facts, the end

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result of all those days spent surfing the web. Ask him about porn sometime. He has the evidence to prove that several of those anatomical impossibilities we speculated upon in adolescence aren't really impossible after all. He gave me the URLs where I can see the actual photographs. (I'll send those later in a separate e-mail, after I check them out myself. The one about the ladies with multiple breasts sounds promising. My guess is that it's all done with Photoshop, but who knows anymore?)

Bert and Ernie are a very odd pair. Where Bert is skeptical, Ernie is enthusiastic — overabundantly so; often to the point where if I were a less patient man, I might have been tempted to inflict bodily harm on him. Nobody is that happy all the time. You want to talk about chemical imbalances...? Start with Ernie. On the other hand, I have to admit, I wish I could bring that kind of unfailing, unflappable enthusiasm to life.

Ernie is also an incorrigible punster. I tried not to incorrige him, but he's a self-starter; more evidence that the shortest distance between two puns is a straight line. Obviously, at some point, he'd been seduced by the dork side of the farce. And in case I hadn't mentioned, Ernie is as black as the space of Hades. And that should give you some idea of what Bert and I had to put up with for the better part of a week. (Someday soon I'm going to lock Ernie into a room with Spider Robinson and Esther Friesner and see which one of them survives. That is, if the universe doesn't implode first. Not with a bang, but a whimper of whipped gods.)

We drove down through Oregon, down into California, to that place I told you about near the Lassen National Forest. I won't be more specific about the location, although it doesn't really matter anymore. You'll see why shortly. We drove the better part of the day and finally arrived in mid-afternoon. Coming in from the north, we didn't see any signs identifying this area as a private hunting club, but I recognized the barbed wire fences; there was nothing like them anywhere else in the area. Driving slowly south, we also found the place where I'd cut the green boy loose from the barbed wire. The broken wire was still hanging loose. I didn't know if that was a good sign or bad.

Then we drove on until we reached the field of red boulders at the bottom end of the private hunting preserve. Our driver let us off — it took less than thirty seconds for us to pull our gear out after us — and then he sped off in the van. Without much talk, we cut our way through the barbed

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wire. Remember, I told you about the sign that said it was a Private Hunting Preserve? Well, the sign was gone now, but the place where it had been was our starting point. It had been posted high on one of the trees, and there was still a faded spot on the bark. So we made that our southern landmark.

We cut our way into the field just where the trees began and vanished into them as quickly as we could. The ground was rocky, but not impassable, and we had to watch our step carefully. I hadn't yet broken in my new hiking boots, but I was wearing three pairs of thick socks and had blister pads taped to my heels, so I wasn't in too much pain.

That first afternoon, we didn't see much — a single jackrabbit, no deer, no bears. And that probably saved Ernie's life, because there are a lot of things you can do with words like deer and bear, most of which he didn't have the chance to. Although he did come close to a near-death experience when he started talking about rabbit transit and rabbit Baptists and finished off by singing, "You're getting to be a rabbit with me." And he hadn't even gotten to the inevitable "hare raid" and "hare apparent" remarks. But it wasn't the puns as much as it was his loud gravelly voice. We really didn't want to attract any attention — or scare anything off either. Finally, I turned to him, walked right up to his face, and whispered intensely, "*Be vewwwy vewwwy quiet.*" I was wearing my ugly face when I did that, the one I use when talking to lawyers, so that seemed to calm him down. For a while.

That first night, the temperature dropped to near-freezing, or maybe below freezing; hard to tell when you're shivering too hard to read the thermometer. We found a hollow, a place where a meter-high shelf aspired toward cliffdom, and parked ourselves under it, out of the wind. We set up our tent in the triangular space under a fallen log, and stretched the camouflage netting over everything. From half a mile away, we were probably invisible. We didn't want to risk a fire, so we ate something called an MRE for dinner. It stands for Meals-Ready-to-Eat. I'm told that soldiers out in the field eat these things. If that's true, then I honestly don't think we pay our soldiers enough. On the other hand, an MRE is a good test of a person's courage. If he can face one of these, he can face anything.

After that, we talked for a while, studied our U.S. Geological Survey

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maps; and speculated about how the green people of the northwest could survive near-freezing temperatures while they ran around naked.

Bert didn't talk much about his past, but I got the sense he'd been around. He'd worked his way through college playing a giant mouse at *that* park in Southern California. During his breaks, he read Kerouac and Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti — they fired him for reading Ferlinghetti; he enlisted and went to Nam, where he'd done things that hadn't happened and nobody knew about. Eventually, he chewed off a leg to escape, changed his name and appearance so they couldn't track him down — he didn't say who *they* were, because everybody already knows who *they* are — came back and smoked Panama Red at the Hog Farm with Wavy Gravy. [At the end of the dirt road leading to the Hog Farm, the sign declares, "No left turn unstoned." Ernie did twenty minutes of variations on that one. Don't ask.] Later, Bert dropped acid with Timothy Leary, and studied the Yaqui Way of Knowledge with Don Juan. He'd been vegan before it had a name, done iridology, numerology, systemology, fasting, body-cleansing, and self-analysis with the Enneagram. He could also read Tarot cards, plot your natal chart, compute your biorhythms in his head, and read your aura. He used his insights into systemic patterns to become one of the hottest day-traders on Wall Street. On the day that someone called him a gecko, he had an acid flashback, bought a hog, and rode directly to the left coast, without passing go.

He was a male model in West Hollywood, with a semi-starring role in the gay-for-pay "Bare Country" video. After that he did "escort" work for a few months, both men and women. He'd chanted at the temple with the Gohonzon Buddhists and on the streets of Hollywood Boulevard with the Hare Krishnas. He'd been deconstructed, he'd been rebirthed, he'd floated in sensory deprivation tanks and listened to hallucinatory committees, he'd been born again. He went to the Synanon games; then he graduated to Esalen and Findhorn. He studied Transactional Analysis, flirted with Scientology, spent three months in a Moonie retreat, done *est* and Lifespring and the Landmark Forum. He became a junior trainer and an enrollment captain, and socked away a lot of money in a very short time. He took a sabbatical, flew sailplanes with Richard Bach, and rebuilt a classic Indian motorcycle with Robert L. Pirsig. Instead of coming back, he took a tramp steamer to the east coast of Africa, worked his way north

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into India, and snuck into Tibet to study with the lamas in the shadow of the Himalayas. Then he snuck out again. He went to the secret islands off the coast of Sri Lanka where potheaded tourists smoked their brains out all day and fucked little brown midgets pretending to be children all night. After that, he spent six months doing penance, not speaking a word, sweeping floors at the Buddhist monastery on Lantau Island (east of Hong Kong), in the shadow of the giant statue of Buddha, 256 steps up the mountain.

He went to Alaska and lumberjacked his way down the coast, drove trucks across Canadian ice roads to places that still don't have names, then he studied a little bit of engineering, dabbled in photography, taught himself programming, wrote a key piece of a "gooey" operating system at a place he called Xerox Park, bought a Corvette, slept his way up and down the left coast, and somewhere in all that, he even invested in Apple and Microsoft when nobody knew what either of those companies might eventually become — what he made on those investments almost made up for what he lost on Commodore and WordStar. He said he'd worked on three presidential campaigns. Bobby Kennedy, John Anderson, and Ross Perot. Later, he charted his passages through life and went drumming with Iron John. After that, he sailed with Greenpeace and while he wouldn't go into the details, he implied he'd had something to do with that Japanese whaler that sank mysteriously off the coast of Alaska. While he was recovering from his injuries, he read slush for two of the major sf magazines, he didn't say which ones; he said there was a lot of money to be made in sf publishing[1], if you knew the right people. But that was before the Internet.

Oh yeah, and here's the part I found hard to believe. He said that he'd once had dinner at Heinlein's house — the round one in Bonny Doon. Then he hopped on his hog and drove south all night to be an extra in the first *Star Trek* movie that was filming its big crew scene the next day. Yes, he really was in the movie. I checked it out later, he's standing right behind the director's wife — a lot thinner, no beard, short hair, but that's him. But the part about him having dinner with the Heinleins — no. I couldn't imagine Ginny Heinlein ever letting this man over her threshold.

[1] Stop laughing, Gordon! That's what he said. —*DG*

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It's not true that she met unwelcome guests with a shotgun, but I never doubted that she could have if she'd wanted to.

He didn't say all that in one long speech, I've just compiled the parts that I remember from the whole five days. And I might have mixed up the order, he wasn't specific. Most of his conversations had a disjointed quality, as if he was running multiple tracks of thought at the same time. He once started to tell me that he might have the adult form of ADHD[2], but he got distracted before he finished. But he was very clear about it. He knew everything there was to know about everything he knew — and that included the green people we were looking for.

Apparently, sightings of green people had been recorded here in the northwest as early as the late 1800s, but in those days, they were thought to be Indian spirits. Some of the immigrants from the old world called them druids or nymphs or sprites. They also showed up as elves and occasionally leprechauns. But by the thirties, they were simply called the people of the forest. Sometime in the early fifties, or the late fifties, or the early sixties, hard to say, Bert wasn't clear, about the time the beats and the bohemians and the hippies started filtering north, that's when the idea began that the green people were something else, like a lost tribe, or a commune, or something. But it was mostly speculation.

Then, during the summer of love, there was a story floating around — this was something Bert could speak of authoritatively, he'd heard it while he was at Findhorn — that some people were actually turning green and becoming part of the northwestern forests, but he'd heard it from a friend of a friend of a friend, and he'd assumed the tale was probably apocryphal, at least until he heard it from a zoned-out hippie in the Haight that no, it wasn't something the Cockettes were doing for a show, it was actually happening, there was some really powerful new dope, Something Green — no, that was the name of it, Something Green — and that if you smoked enough of it, or ate it in brownies, or something like that, maybe you had to shoot it, he was pretty zoned out, you could really turn green, he knew it was true because his girlfriend, or maybe she was his boyfriend, it was getting harder to tell, had turned green and was living in Golden Gate Park now, soaking up rays —

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[2] Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

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And while Bert still didn't believe it then, it was supposed to be good luck to see a green person — or fuck a green person. It depended on who was telling the story. And apparently, if you had sex with a green person, you could turn green too. And it was supposed to be the greatest high of all time. It was starting to sound like a body-snatcher thing, and that's why when they remade the movie, they set it in San Francisco, except that this was supposed to be a good thing. An organic thing.

There was more. But if you tried to fit all the different pieces together, you couldn't. Most of it sounded pretty bizarre anyway; you had to wonder if there might be some kind of Jungian archetype at work, maybe the collective subconscious of the left coast was creating a new mythology because the people caught up in it had some weird psychological need to believe in *benign otherness*. Or, if that didn't sit right, you could always invest in the inevitable conspiracy theory — that some secret agency that didn't have a name was infecting leftist troublemakers with a chlorophyll virus that mutated them into plants.

But underneath the stories, there was a consistent thread, and as near as I could translate it into English from Bert's semi-coherent chronology, the whole thing had started when somebody, some mad scientist somewhere, had hypothesized that the way out of the Malthusian bear-trap was to give humans the ability to photosynthesize sugars the way plants do. That way, we could stand out in the sunlight, and instead of getting a tan, we'd generate chlorophyllins, and we'd turn green instead of brown; and all those little green chloroplasts, or whatever they were called, would happily turn sunlight into blood-sugar. The green people were the survivors or the descendants or the escaped lab rats of these experiments. Other versions of the tale had the chlorophyll virus coming from secret biological warfare laboratories; sometimes the associated name was Mengele, sometimes it was Jonas Salk. A lot of misinformation had attached to the story, like conversational barnacles. The green mythos was a colossal game of Russian telephone, and if there had ever been a nugget of truth in the telling, it was long since buried under an avalanche of paranoid bullshit.

Oh yeah, one more thing. The Green Party. You know, the political movement called The Green Party? Supposedly, at their core, at the innermost secret center of the whole global network, you'll find a holy nexus of green people functioning as the spiritual leaders, speaking

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transcendant sunlit truths to those who function as the visible public leaders of the movement. Those who are in on the secret dedicate their entire lives to the movement because they aspire to earn the right to ascend into green godhood. There are private conclaves in secret glades, that kind of thing.

That was Bert. And that's most of what he said in five days. But he was dependable and he was thorough in a brusque, military way. His motivations and opinions might be scattered all over the landscape, but he produced results.

Ernie, on the other hand, was here for the adventure. He didn't really believe in the green people, but maybe he did. Because if they really existed, wouldn't it be cool to turn green and just live in total cosmic harmony with all the other plants in the forest, stretching your leaves up to the sun and soaking in the life-giving warmth and —

Yeah, Ernie just wanted to *be* green. Maybe he thought it would be easier than being black. I dunno. Oh, I should also mention that Ernie had a doctorate in biology, believe it or don't. He'd worked on the genome project and now he was a seed-gatherer for the Genetic Bank — you know, the one that the Benford Foundation set up to preserve the world's genetic diversity. It was a perfect job for him, because he could take off into the hills almost any time he felt like it and someone else would pay for the trip. As long as he brought back seeds.

And me? I'm just this fading science fiction writer wondering where his next Hugo is coming from. (And no, I'm not going to adopt another child just to win another award. One was enough, thanks. It was good advice when Connie Willis first suggested it to me in 1991, but not now. In gratitude, I'm organizing a write-in campaign to elect her the next president of the Science Fiction Writers of America.)

But I knew why I was here. If I could prove to myself that I hadn't hallucinated the whole thing, I'd be happy. I don't mind going senile, I just want to *know* that I'm going senile.

We didn't do a lot of talking that first evening. We were too tired. And cold. So as soon as we could, we settled in for the night. Except for the exquisitely well-placed rocks, the ground was almost soft enough to be comfortable. I slept between Bert and Ernie. Ernie farts and Bert snores, but I was warm, so I didn't complain — although I did wake up with a

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splitting headache and still exhausted. Who ever said camping was fun? I've had fun, this wasn't it. This wasn't even on the same page as fun. Instead of breakfast, we had energy drinks and granola bars. I will never insult an Egg McMuffin again.

We spent the first three or four hours walking some warmth back into our bones. Mine made noises like tap-dancing pixies every time I moved. The ground was less rocky up here, but it was still uphill, and the elevation was enough that I spent most of the day either moving slowly or simply trying to catch my breath. Bert and Ernie didn't say anything, but we all knew they could have made a lot better time without me.

At some point in the morning, while staring up at the pines — everything smelled of pine, real pine, not the kind of smell you get from those little cardboard trees that hang from the rearview mirror — at some point, I realized I didn't really have to be here. Once I'd shown them where I cut through the wire, I was done. I could have stayed in the van and driven down to Red Bluff with Emmett Grogan. I think that was when I began having that inevitable internal conversation about commitment, obsession, and damned foolishness. In the cold clear light of morning my head felt cold, clear, and light. And the whole business of little naked boys, green or otherwise, being hunted by guys in cowboy hats and sunglasses, guys who smelled of cigars and sweat, suddenly started to feel...well, stupid.

And then I started thinking how stupid Bert and Ernie must be to come out here just because I'd said I'd seen a green person — well, that and a bloodstained blanket and a couple of bloody bandages. Either I was awfully convincing, and yeah, I can be awfully convincing, or they were awfully gullible — or worse, they were true believers. And true believers are the worst kind. They're the ones to whom facts are disposable.

Sometime around two or three in the afternoon, we reached the place where the stream forked. We'd come up between the two legs and now stood on the banks of a pond roughly the size of a football field. The water rippled peacefully under the crisp afternoon breeze. A low concrete berm defined the lower part of the pond. The larger of the two streams poured over a sloping dam; a break in the berm fed the smaller. We refilled our canteens here; the water was bitterly cold. It had probably been lying white on the ground somewhere in the highlands for a few months, until it decided to move down here.

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We found a small footbridge over the larger stream; on the other side was a hint of a trail. Not a lot of traffic came through here, but enough to have packed the soil. It could have just as easily been an animal highway as a human one, probably the deer and the bears came down to the pond to drink; but the pond was artificial and that had to mean something. If plants need water, then that means green people need it too, right? "Do green people drink water?" Ernie asked. "Or do they just suck moisture from the ground with their toes? Like osmosis?" (Which led him inevitably into a riddle. "The answer is osmosis, what's the question?" "Who led the children of Israel out of Oz?")

I offered my not-so-humble opinion that green people do drink water in its liquid form. I pointed out that I had given the injured green boy a water bottle and once he had figured out how it worked, he had sucked at it thirstily. So obviously, green people do have working mouths. And they're smart enough not to use them for terrible puns.

After a bit of wrangling, we decided to follow the path north — in absolute silence, and with frequent stops to listen for oncoming traffic. Periodically, we'd step off the trail and listen quietly. Where we could, we used our binoculars, or the telephoto lenses on our cameras to examine distant slopes. But so far, we'd seen nothing out of the ordinary, and if we encountered anyone, we would have been just what we pretended to be — three stupid hikers, lost because we were following our trail map upside down.

The trail wandered away from the stream that fed the pond, and then occasionally wandered back toward it. Higher up, the path began to look more purposeful, but we still saw no evidence that anyone had passed this way recently.

Our second night, we found what looked like it might have been a hunter's blind. It was a wooden deck, raised half a meter off the ground and surrounded by foliage. It overlooked a wide meadow; the stream had widened here and a small shallow pond had formed. Another convenient watering hole. Probably a seasonal phenomenon. By the end of summer, it would be a dusty patch of hardened earth marked by the impatient scrapings of deer hooves.

Inside the blind, we had what would have passed for comfort, if any of us actually remembered what comfort was. My feet were cold, my legs

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were cold, my knees were cold and noisy; and my bladder hurt, even though I'd been trying to pee all day — or maybe *because* I'd been trying to pee all day. My nose was running, my head still ached, and despite all the menthol drops I'd been sucking on, I had a terrible cough and my throat was starting to hurt. Bert boiled some water and shredded some tree bark into it and gave it to me to drink. God knows what it was, but it wasn't tea. For some reason, Ernie started to construct an elaborate pun about finding a bar soon for his deep throat, but Bert reached over and stuck a fork through his trachea and that kept him occupied for a while, at least until the bleeding stopped. To my dying day, I promise, I will not want to know the rest. And if somehow someone accidentally inflicts it on me anyway, I promise I will not pass it on.

Once again, I slept between the two of them — I was beginning to figure it out, they weren't doing me any favors; they didn't like each other all that much and neither of them wanted to be next to the other. I tossed and turned for a while, then drifted into a truly horrible dream where one of my readers was following me around, taking care of my every little need, and giving me adoring puppy-dog looks. It was hideous. I woke up shaking — and grateful that so far in my career I have managed to avoid real fame. (And no, *Star Trek* doesn't count. That's borrowed glory, not something I created myself.)

In the morning, I was feeling marginally better. Marginally is a euphemism for "not at all." But at least I knew I was alive, because I was experiencing pain. Trust me, Descartes had it wrong. What he meant to say was, "I hurt, therefore I am."

So we sat for a while and watched the meadow. I think a large part of that decision was that inside the blind it was still warm from our combined body heat. Outside, it would be cold and the cold would start biting our noses and ears very quickly. We sat quietly, sipping cold energy drinks and gnawing at cold-hardened granola bars, and pondered the biology of green people. This is when I found out that Ernie had a doctorate in ecological biosystems.

See, a human being running around naked in the high forests would die of exposure, three days max, probably a lot sooner. Depends on the weather. That's because humans are mammals, warm-blooded, and our bodies maintain a stable body temperature by something called homeostasis, and

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we have to burn lots of food to maintain our 98.6. Cold-blooded creatures, on the other hand, they get warmer or colder with their surroundings. That's why crocodiles have to lie out in the sun every morning, to warm themselves up enough to move. But the green people, if they've turned part plant, then obviously they're not completely mammalian anymore. Something about the chloroplasts (or whatever it is they've got) is either supplying enough energy to maintain homeostasis — not really likely, plants have a much slower metabolic rate than animals — or it's turning these people into some kind of cold-blooded creatures.

Ernie explained (I'm leaving out the puns, you're welcome) that the problem with cold weather is that when temperatures drop to freezing, the water in plant cells turns to ice. The ice fractures the cell structures. When the ice melts, the result is mush. Have you ever tried celery that's been frozen and thawed? No? Try it. While some plants actually depend on frost to help strip off last year's dead outer layers, most of the smaller plants beat winter by dying and leaving their seeds or roots or bulbs safe in the (relative) warmth of the earth. Trees, of course, well — they're trees. They shed their dead leaves and wait patiently for the snow to melt and water their roots. But that wouldn't work for greenies. Being mobile takes work, a greenie has to burn a lot of energy. So a greenie's metabolism would need to maintain some basic level of homeostasis to keep his body temperature above freezing, right?

Ernie wasn't given to speculation, that's my job. The most I could get out of him was a grudging admittance that if people really are turning green and running around naked in the forests, then the process has to involve a lot more than a little chlorophyll under the skin. We both agreed that green people would probably need to find sunny places every morning, to warm up like crocodiles. The meadow we were watching, for instance, would be a great place for that — but by half past ten, it was fairly obvious that no green people were going to come here, and we were going to have to resume our search for them.

Today, the hills were steeper, and unfortunately, we were on the downside of the steep, so our progress was a lot slower. It was like carrying your grandmother uphill the whole way. And maybe her Mah Jongg club as well. The longer the day went on, the more weight she gained. She's just *gotta* stop noshing on those latkes with sour cream and applesauce.

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About noon, I assumed it was noon, the sun was high overhead, we arrived at another field, this one fairly well exposed. The day had warmed up enough that the three of us just stopped and stood out in the sun, trying to soak up some warmth. And while we did that, I began to get a sense of what it might be like to be green. It was like standing in a hot shower, just letting the water cascade down, simultaneously enervating and energizing. It was very easy for me to dream of a hot shower — I was already starting to stink, and Bert and Ernie had passed that point before we'd even gotten out of the van.

But standing out there in that field, basking in the warmth of the blazing star, soaking in its life-giving energy — I could have done that forever. And if that was what it was to be green, only much more intensely, I could see why people would seek it out.

And then, abruptly, it was time to move on. I asked a dumb question about the energy levels in the average mammal and Ernie used that as a starting point for a circuitous lecture about ADHD being the natural state for survival in the wild and that most higher-level mammals exhibited all the symptoms of hyperactive behavior. This led, inevitably — inevitably for Ernie, that is — to his elaborate account of Tearalong (The Dotted Lion), and how to identify sexual identity confusion in cats. Apparently they couldn't get this particular lion to come out of the wardrobe. Finally, they just opened a store buying and selling wardrobes, and called it Narnia Business. (I'll show you on the map where we buried Ernie. Maybe we should have killed him first, but we were in a hurry.)

The rest of the day was spent hiking upward, always upward — and finally, I had the smarts to ask why we hadn't started at the north end and journeyed south. Bert shrugged. "Do the opposite of the obvious." As if that little bit of left-coast-Zen was answer enough. But by this time, I didn't have the strength to argue. I just concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. Ernie, who had experienced only a mild case of death, didn't even bother to go for the easy pun, so apparently my two companions were also getting tired and frustrated.

Late afternoon, however, we finally found *something*. Well, a promise of something. We came to an old dirt road; at some point in the past, a bulldozer had cut a single lane through the trees. There were tire tracks here, but not recent ones, so after all three of us had stated the obvious,

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that a road has to lead somewhere, as well as the not-so-obvious, that it would be a lot easier to follow the road than hike up another damned rocky hill, we decided to follow it. As before, we stopped frequently to listen for vehicles, but the only thing we heard was our own labored breathing, and occasionally the pounding of the blood between my ears.

I'm not sure how far we followed the road, it could have been two or three miles, maybe more, I honestly don't know how deep into the forest that hunting preserve extended, but after a couple of hours, the dirt road led us to some kind of camp. As soon as we spotted the first outlying buildings in the distance, we backed away. We didn't know if there were people there or not. So, we hiked back a ways, then climbed up a hill — always up, never down; remember that the next time you're invited hiking — to a point where we could look down on the whole installation.

Ernie's first observation was that it looked like a marijuana farm. We saw three long drying sheds and a good-sized cabin nearby that could have functioned as both a cookhouse and a bunkhouse. We didn't see any smoke coming from the chimney. Next to the cabin was a covered area for parking vehicles, but no vehicles were present, except an old VW van parked nearby, but it had a broken window and two flat tires, and it looked like it hadn't been washed since the first flower children had parked it here. Whatever color it might have started out as would only be determined at this point by either an archaeologist or a metallurgist.

"You'd better hope it's not a pot plantation," Bert said. "Not unless you know how to outrun a shotgun. Pot causes paranoia — especially in people growing it."

"It looks abandoned to me," I said.

"Don't make assumptions."

I had to assume Bert knew what he was talking about. I'd seen the scar tissue on his neck and left arm. You don't get slash marks like that falling down stairs.

We studied the camp through binoculars. Then we took telephoto pictures. Then we slid aways back down the hill and looked at the pictures on Ernie's video player. Then we whispered back and forth for a while. Is this a pot farm or not? If it is, where were the growing fields? Well, maybe those buildings that we thought were drying sheds are actually full of sun lamps and hydroponics tanks? Look at all the wires going to

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that outbuilding, and the fuel tank next to it — doesn't that suggest a generator?

If it was a pot farm, then that would explain the barbed wire and the signs saying that this was a private hunting club. What a great way to keep out the curious — including the Lassen County Sheriff. And it would also explain the armed men I'd met on my previous trip through this terrain. Except — it didn't explain the green boy, unless I'd been smoking some of that pot and hadn't noticed. No, I think I would have noticed that. I'm pretty sure I haven't touched the stuff since...I dunno, when was the last ELO concert in Anaheim? (Yes, that's the story you heard. It was six months before I found out that my so-called "friends" had actually redressed me in that outfit *after* I'd passed out on the couch. I was really disappointed to discover that — it brought to a screeching halt a whole personal mythos of exciting sexual fantasies and imagined playmates.)

But if it wasn't a pot farm, what else could it be? It sure didn't look like any hunting camp Bert had ever seen. Ernie had never been hunting and neither had I; so our opinions on the matter were unformed. Finally, unable to come to any kind of rational conclusion, we decided to hunker down on the hill and watch the camp for signs of life and if we didn't see anybody by tomorrow afternoon, we'd walk in on the road, pretending we were three lost and stupid campers; which wouldn't take all that much pretending, the facts being self-evident.

The only flaw in that plan was the possibility that we might be too close to a shed full of giant green pods, and that while we were sleeping our bodies would be replaced and we would wake up soulless and without emotion. Ernie said that in his case it was too late, he was already an iPod-person. Bert and I exchanged a glance. "Ernie's getting tired. That doesn't even justify violence." I considered a remark about Ernie losing his ah-finney-tee for wordplay, but decided the reference was just too obscure for this audience. Time after time, some puns work; some don't.

Eventually, we crawled back to the top of the hill and resumed our surveillance — this struck me as possibly a good opening scene for an adventure novel, a squad of commandos looks down into a valley and sees some kind of strange alien infestation, but I couldn't figure out where to go with it from there. We bedded down on the ridge and maintained watch on and off all night. If there was anyone in the camp below, Bert's snoring

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should have aroused them, but the camp remained dark and silent. By morning, we were certain that the place was deserted, but we waited anyway.

Early afternoon, we scrambled back down to the road, made ourselves look like three disheveled campers who'd slept in our clothes, and plodded dutifully into the deserted camp. We started with the main building. It had been pretty well stripped. Some bunks and benches remained, a couple of chairs and two heavy wooden tables. Otherwise, the place was bare. Even the light fixtures were gone. We did find an old box of baking soda on one of the shelves. And near the door there were some tiny bits of paper, the kind of detritus you might find after someone had shredded a lot of documents. Whatever or whoever had happened here, they'd moved on and they hadn't left any evidence behind.

The same was true of the drying sheds — if that's what they were. There were some posts in one of the sheds, indicating where dividing walls might have been, if the sheds had been divided into stalls, and there were wires running the length of the ceiling. Two light fixtures remained in that same shed, and one of them still had a burned-out sun lamp in it. So they could have been drying sheds, or a hydroponics farm, but it could just as easily have been a winter resort for greenies; so that didn't prove anything one way or the other.

There was no smell of pot here, and you would think that if this had really been a pot farm that the place would reek of it. Instead, there was a strange thick cloying pineapple-apricot stink, only kind of slithery and lizard-like too. If you can imagine that. It wasn't orchids. That much I was sure of. Orchids don't smell. There were webby footprints in a couple of the empty stalls, and there were some clumps of ivy or kudzu or something at one end of one of the buildings. At the back, in a clearing we hadn't been able to see from the crest of the hill, there was a corral, fenced by more barbed wire. The sun blazed down into the corral and if I were a greenie, I bet I could spend a happy afternoon just blooming there.

The rest of our search was equally fruitless. The generator building was empty — as if the generator had been hastily removed and trucked out. We unscrewed the feed into the big fuel tank, but even though it still smelled of gasoline, when we banged on it, it resonated like the Tin Man's empty chest. We circled the camp, but didn't find anything else. The area

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had been fairly well policed, and except for that rotting pineapple smell, a casual observer would assume this had been a pot farm — and you could probably explain the pineapple stench as the unwelcome residue of some industrial strength cleansing detergent.

So that was pretty much it. We came, we saw, we saw nothing. We came away with blisters. We hiked back along the dirt road until it reached the main highway, and called for pickup. We didn't have to wait long. Our van driver had been sleeping in a rest stop near Red Bluff during the night; during the day, he parked about twenty miles south of our drop-off point and listened to his scanner and read Terry Pratchett novels. "I like Pratchett," he said. "His stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end." He gave me a dirty look when he said this; I deliberately chose not to respond. Until my dramatic license is revoked, I'll write any damn thing you pay me for.

Back north, in that town or city I'm not going to name, I stood in the hot shower and made orgasmic noises until the water finally turned cold; I thought about shaving, decided not to, and finally, luxuriously, put on soft clean clothes — don't let anyone kid you, clean underwear is a sacred right — and then hobbled downstairs to toss the rest of my stuff into the back of my camper. It was time to head home.

There's just one more thing to tell. The guy I called Bert was leaning against the camper shell, stuffing an unlit pipe with something that smelled fruity and vaguely familiar.

"So?" he asked. "You done?"

I shrugged. "Why do you care?"

He shrugged right back. "I don't really."

This whole thing was one big shrug. "I'm tired. I'm going home. There's nothing else to do, is there?"

He didn't answer. He just continued packing his pipe.

"Look, I saw a green boy on that road. I know it. Maybe I should have taken pictures, but I was rattled, I wasn't thinking clearly. But I saw what I saw."

"Yep," said Bert. "You saw what you saw. Just like UFOs and Sasquatch and Elvis. Nobody ever gets a good picture. It's the photo-resistant morphogenic field that cryptozoological phenomena generate around themselves."

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"So if you don't believe me, why'd you go on this wild goose chase?"

"I didn't say I don't believe you."

"But — ?"

"But nothing." He continued stuffing his pipe.

I stopped what I was doing, pointlessly rearranging things in the camper shell. "Is there a point to all this?"

"No. Not really."

I rolled my eyes. I'm good at rolling my eyes. Especially when I'm trying to hide how pissed I am. "I'm going home. I'm going to put on a Sibelius symphony. Maybe I'll put on a whole bunch of Sibelius symphonies. And maybe some Ralph Vaughn Williams too. And maybe I'll look at pornographic pictures of redheads and eat a box of Godiva chocolate. But I think I'm through with green people for a while."

"That's probably a good idea." He straightened up, pushing himself off the camper. He looked at me very seriously. This was the punch line. "You want some free advice?" he said. "Worth exactly what you're payin' for it?"

"I'm listening."

"If there are people out there who can buy a tract of land that big and hide what they're doing that well for that long, they can probably do just about anything else they want. You might want to keep that in mind."

"Yeah, I already had that thought. But thanks anyway." I tossed the last duffel into the back, the one with all the dirty clothes.

"People with big secrets — people get hurt. That's not good." Bert finally finished packing his pipe and struck a match with his thumbnail. He sucked gently, the flame bent to the tobacco, and sweet smoke curled upward. "You want to be careful."

I slammed the camper shut and faced him. "Just one thing — "

"Yeah?"

"Who are you. I mean, who are you *really*?"

"Me?" He smiled. The first smile I'd ever seen on his grizzled face. "I'm just like everybody else in your life. I'm exactly what you want to see. You figure it out."

"I *am* figuring it out. Here's what I'm figuring. What if somebody took me out in the woods and showed me exactly what they wanted me to see. What if the best way to keep a secret this big is to control the search for it?"

He blinked. "Isn't that a little paranoid?"

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"Probably. But paranoia is a necessary skill, especially when you're surrounded by editors, agents, and lawyers. Now answer the question."

"Okay," he said, surprising me with his candor. And suddenly, all the bristle of the last five days was gone and he looked like a real scientist. "Try it this way. What if your facts are accurate, but your interpretation is confused."

"That's a polite way of saying it. What *are* you saying?"

"You saw a sign that said private hunting club. You saw barbed wire. You saw a boy caught in a fence. You saw men with guns. You made an assumption — it fit the facts you had, but what if your assumption was wrong?"

"It wouldn't be the first time."

"You said it yourself. What if the hunting club signs were a way to keep folks away from the pot farm. Only, if there's no pot farm, and no hunting club, then what's left — and why would you need the signs?"

I thought about the sheds, the stalls, everything else — especially the installations for overhead lamps. Sun lamps. Of course — it made sense. Sort of. Oh. "It's a sanctuary, isn't it? The boy wasn't running away. He was lost. And cold. And scared. And the men I met, the ones with guns, they were really there to protect the greenies from people like me, weren't they?"

"Yeah, that's a different interpretation. How well does it fit the facts?"

My mind raced through the implications. "That's why they had to clear it out so completely. A hunting camp — no big deal. But a sanctuary, they can't risk people asking questions. The publicity would kill them. The media would go bugfuck. It'd be a bigger circus than — I dunno — but it'd be big."

"And who would get hurt the worst?"

"Oh. Yeah, I see."

"Yeah, you do."

We stood there a moment, just looking at each other, just studying each other.

"So, this is like — a Greenpeace thing, right?"

He shook his head. "It might be."

"You don't know?"

"Honestly? No, I don't." He sucked at his pipe. "Yeah, I used to know

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some people. But I haven't talked to anyone in a long time. I'm not even sure where I could start looking. But whatever was there, somebody tipped them off, that's for sure. They had to know their security was breached, that's why they cleared out."

"Well, there's not a lot of people who could have told them. Just Dennis and Jay, and you and Ernie, and whoever you told — ?"

He raised an eyebrow. I've always been jealous of people who can do that. I can't. "You e-mailed a story to *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, didn't you?" He lowered his eyebrow.

"Oh, come on! Gordon Van Gelder as a member of The International Green People Conspiracy — ? I know there's that stuff with his father, but still it's easier to believe that you had dinner with Heinlein, and I don't believe that at all."

He didn't answer immediately. Finally, he said, "Look. Remember I said you could make a lot of money in sf publishing, if you knew the right people? There used to be a — call it an office — that helped fund some of the major sf magazines. They paid the editors an extra consulting fee. There was a list and a phone number. If anybody sent in any stories on any of those topics on the list, they were supposed to phone in the info on the story. I think it started in 1944, with that Cleve Cartmill story about the atom bomb. Remember *Astounding Science Fiction* — John W. Campbell editor? Something of a loose cannon? Maybe it was easier to buy him out and let him feel secretly important. Maybe. I don't know for sure."

"Okay, y'know, Bert — you had me at the Sanctuary part. I really would like to believe that somewhere in northern California, or Oregon, or Idaho, or somewhere else in the northwest woods, maybe there's a secret place, or even a lot of secret places, where green people can safely stretch their palms up to the sky and soak in the warmth of the sun. That would be something I could believe in. But this? My editor?! Sorry. I can believe six impossible things before breakfast, but not that one."

"Okay, have it your way." He took a last deep puff off his pipe, then turned and walked away from me. He climbed into his late-model Jeep, started the engine, put it in gear, and let it roll away down the hill, leaving me with a camper full of dirty clothes and unanswered questions...and the faint smell of pineapple and apricot smoke in the air.

So, that's it, Gordon. Somebody knows what's really going on. Maybe

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it's Bert and Ernie. Maybe it's you. It sure as hell isn't me. Whoever wanted to muddy the issue did a really good job. I'm tired as hell. I give up. I'm going back to writing about things I do know — how we have to build Lunar colonies so we can escape the giant alien man-eating worms from outer space. I'll send you another one of those stories soon.

(signed) Your Pal,
David Gerrold

Onocentaur

By Sophie M. White

No animal shelter
Will take you.
When I left you
In the country,
You always found your way back.
Those who answered my ad
Wanted a "real" centaur —
Not one with the body of an ass.

Please find a new home!
I barely have room for my dachshund,
Let alone a critter like you.
The floors are sagging,
And your stench is in my
Curtains and couch.
You need to be in a wide pasture,
Not a downtown apartment!

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Un Lun Dun, by China Miéville, Del Rey, 2007, $17.95.

I WANTED to like this book a lot more than I did. I certainly went into it with a positive attitude. After all, this is China Miéville, whose *King Rat* was easily one of the best debuts our field had seen in a long time. It was inventive and beautifully written, with deeply rendered characters and a plot that never quite went where you expected it to, but oh, the places it did take you.

Miéville followed that debut with a number of other books, each of which upped the ante and delivered.

And now we have *Un Lun Dun*.

Which is not a terrible book, by any means. The prose is as strong as ever, and if anything, it's his most inventive book to date. However....

It's being marketed as a YA book for all ages, but I think that the only readers who will be deeply satisfied will be very young ones. Teens and up are going to be disappointed, which is too bad, because the good parts are as good as anything Miéville has given us to date.

The story follows Deeba, a young London girl whose best friend Zanna is the Chosen One who will save unLondon, a twin city in another dimension, or perhaps just a few steps sideways from the original, that grew out of all the unwanted bits of our London. But things don't work out quite the way the two would hope.

What's good?

The ideas are fabulous. Miéville has more fascinating ideas in every few pages than most writers do in an entire novel. And they just keep coming: whimsical, strange, even horrifying.

And then there's the way he subverts the tropes of fantasy novels. I'd tell you exactly how, but I don't want to spoil the story for

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you. Read the book and you'll quickly see what I mean.

What doesn't work?

Unfortunately, the characters are all flat. This is an "events" novel from start to finish, one event leading breathlessly into the next, and that's the book's other problem. It's much too busy.

Those fabulous ideas I mentioned earlier? Every time we just start to get interested in something — a character, a situation, some new odd and wonderful place — we're already moving on to the next. And often, that's the only time we see them.

Busy, busy, busy.

As I reread what I've written above, I can see that this is a confusing review. Did I, or did I not, like the book? A little of both is the only answer I can give you, and as annoyed as I was for much of the book, I still find myself wanting to recommend it to you.

I think the real problem with *Un Lun Dun* can be found in the interview that was in the back of the galley I read. When asked by the interviewer if this is a YA book, Miéville says, "Absolutely," then goes on to add, "There's a certain kind of fairy-tale logic you can use in a YA book that you can't in an adult book, or at least not without tipping into a kind of mannered fabulism that, in adult fiction, I don't love. I couldn't use a character with a bottle of ink for a head in an adult book."

I couldn't disagree more. YA books aren't a place where anything can happen. A belief such as that just shows a disrespect to your audience. Teen readers are as smart and savvy as adult readers — some of them more so. And adult novels can have all sorts of whimsical and dark oddities in them.

They aren't "mannered fabulism" in the right hands. Readers will accept many things when they start a book, but no matter how outlandish the things we meet in its pages might be, the good author roots it all in believable characters. Characters that live and breathe and grow as the story unfolds.

And that's where *Un Lun Dun* fails. Miéville's characters are differentiated only by their physical attributes. They act a certain way, because they look a certain way. I think he was trying for an *Alice in Wonderland* quirkiness, and that might have worked in a smaller book, or perhaps one with longer scenes. Even Carroll spent more time in his scenes than Miéville does, and while Alice is an innocent to whom things happen, Miéville's

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Deeba isn't. She's a doer, but we're always told what she feels and why she does the things she does; we don't actually get to know her.

It's too bad. If Miéville had just taken a bit more care with his characters, and reined in the barrage of images and events a little, he might very well have had one of those classic children's books he mentions admiring so much in his interview.

As it is, enjoy *Un Lun Dun* for the wonderful images it can conjure. Just don't expect to be with any one for very long, or to ever really get to know the characters.

The final book will have fifty illustrations by the author which weren't included in the galley I read, but you can see a few at: *www.unlundun.com*. They're wonderfully odd and charming, proving that Miéville appears to be as talented an artist as he usually is an author.

Underland, by Mary Patterson Thornburg, AuthorHouse, 2005, $9.90.

Mary Patterson Thornburg understands the need for strong characterization. Her *Underland* might be a self-published novel, but from page one, she knows that if she wants readers to stay with her, she has to give us someone we can care about. And so we get Alyssha Dodson living in the small Midwestern city of Granville, and we do care about her.

Alyssha lives with her dad and cat Hoppy. Four years previously, her brother mysteriously disappeared, and they've been looking for him ever since. Except as the book opens, a pair of nasty men comes looking for them, or for something they have, and familial love isn't part of the equation.

When Alyssha and her father make their separate escapes, Alyssha's takes her all the way into an otherworld, and soon we begin to see connections between the two worlds, Alyssha's missing brother, and just what those men were looking for.

I liked this book right from the start, and though the protagonist is young, the story feels more like an all-ages fantasy than a strictly YA book.

In sharp contrast to Miéville's newest novel, *Underland* moves at a more leisurely pace — perhaps too leisurely for the MTV generation, but I don't see that as a flaw. The world she depicts, and the people inhabiting it, are such that I'm interested in spending time with them and learning more about their

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history and relationships. It's all wonderfully realized.

I find it interesting to contrast these two books — one from a big publishing house, the other self-published — mostly because, without all the big name and hoopla behind it, *Underland* still proved to be the much more satisfying read. Yes, it could probably have used a light editing hand here and there — but only a light one was needed. Mostly, the book stands admirably as it is and should delight fantasy readers of all ages.

* * *

Conan: The Ultimate Guide to the World's Most Savage Barbarian, by Roy Thomas, DK Publishing, 2006, $24.99.

The book in hand is only the latest volume celebrating the centennial of Robert E. Howard. I know; the title's a bit over the top, and the full-color artwork that leaps out at you from every oversized page appears to be mostly culled from various comic book interpretations of Howard's famous character, but it should still delight all but the most scholarly of Conan readers.

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The text — penned by Roy Thomas, who with his comic book scripts probably wrote more words about Howard's characters than did Howard himself — is basically a heavily illustrated biography of the world's most famous barbarian. It sets the stage of the Hyborian Age with a background of the landscape, gods, and history, then starts with Conan's humble beginnings on a battlefield and takes us all the way through to his rule as King of Aquilonia.

As such, it serves as an enthusiastic introduction to the character, and readers unfamiliar with the canon can easily cross-reference the events Thomas describes with the original stories to get the full impact of Howard's storytelling skills. A comprehensive index will take them back to the entries in *The Ultimate Guide* where connections not so readily apparent in the stories themselves are clearly described.

I'm not sure it's a "must have" for longtime readers of the prose books, but it will certainly appeal to anyone who followed the monthly comics from Marvel, and provides a fascinating look into the history of Conan to readers who only know the character from the comic book series currently being published by Dark Horse, as well as readers of Dynamite Entertainment's *Red Sonja* series. (Although the "she-devil with a sword" doesn't actually get any face time in this book; probably because she was created by Thomas and artist Barry Windsor-Smith, rather than Howard, and so isn't a part of the official canon.)

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P. O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Don Mead's first published story was "iKlawa" in our April 2006 issue. He returns now with a daring story that takes us back almost 160 years to El Dorado County, California, where we meet a young woman with a most unusual conflict facing her.

Mr. Mead reports that he is working on more short stories. He serves on sf convention panels in the Midwest promoting short fiction as a way to build a writing career. He's also a moderator for the writer's workshop at Windycon in Chicago.

A Thing Forbidden

By Donald Mead

CHRIST'S DEAD EYES OPENED and he gave me a blood-soaked stare.

My yelp was swallowed up by the lingering chords of the hymn. I grabbed Mrs. Mora's arm and pointed at the wooden crucifix that hung at the front of the sanctuary.

She gave it a look and shrugged. "A lot of things are going to be different in a Catholic church, Virginia. Our cross has Christ nailed to it. You might think it's distasteful, but it reminds us of His suffering for our sins."

I regarded the crucifix again. Christ sagged, eyes closed. Maybe it was just the mountains come-a-calling, although the horror had never before followed me into church. That always had been my safe place. My breathing eased as we sat.

Mrs. Mora tucked the hymnal away and handed me several loose sheets of paper. "Have you been following along?" She touched her finger to one of the sheets. "We're here."

I nodded and took the sheets, giving Christ a quick glance.

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I fought the urge to yank off the thin black scarf Mrs. Mora had given me to wear over my hair — over my hat, really. I didn't know women wore scarves in Catholic church, and I had so wanted to make a good impression with my little round hat fixed up with flowers and feathers. It matched perfectly with my calico hooped skirt and jacket. But when Mrs. Mora saw it, she had insisted I wear "a modest scarf." She had even wanted me to take off my hat, which I couldn't do since it was fixed with pins and held my curls up.

Mama had helped me with the hat that morning. She put her love into it despite the circumstances. "Please come with us to the Methodist service at the fort," she had said. "One Christian is as good as another in God's eyes."

"You know the vow I made in the mountains, Mama." I smiled, but the look she returned held only anguish.

Papa had hitched up the carriage for me; I couldn't ride horseback in a hooped skirt. He didn't answer when I said good-bye.

People in the front pews rose and shuffled into the center aisle, led by a man in a dark jacket and matching trousers. His thick black hair was tied back and stuffed down his collar.

They lined up in front of the priest. Father O'Rourke seemed almost dwarfish standing before the man in the dark jacket. I guessed the Spanish cowboy — *vaqueros* Mrs. Mora called them — stood six and a half feet tall.

Father O'Rourke retrieved a plate of wafers from the altar. He took one and held it up. "*Corpus Domini nostri Jesu Christi custodiat animam tuam in vitam aeternam. Amen.*"

He placed the wafer in the man's mouth.

I looked at the papers again — Mrs. Mora's handwritten translations. *May the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ preserve your soul unto everlasting life. Amen.*

The man turned away and the next in line, a much shorter *vaquero*, just a bit taller than Father O'Rourke, stepped forward.

Mrs. Mora nudged me and gave me an impish smile. "So many men."

I felt myself flush and looked away. The church was filled with men — women sprinkled among them like cactus flowers. Many were Spanish, but there were also Irish, German, and American immigrants.

Mrs. Mora leaned closer. "There's so much work to be done. Jobs are

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bringing men from everywhere. Some people are getting rich." She poked me to make me look at her. "How old are you? Old enough to marry?"

I shook my head. "Sixteen."

"But soon," she said. "And your pick of men."

I looked forward to keep from laughing. "When I write to my cousins in Springfield, I tell them to forget Illinois and come to California. They could get a good man in no time."

"And things will only get better once we become a state," said Mrs. Mora. "I hope they send more priests. So many souls to save. So many baptisms."

People in the next pew stood and moved to the aisle.

"What should I do when it's our turn?"

Mrs. Mora reddened. "Oh, nothing this time. The Holy Eucharist is for Catholics only. But you won't have long to wait to receive the body of Christ. Were you a Christian before...?" Her voice became strained. "Before you joined the Donner train?"

"Yes. Methodist."

"Oh, that's good." She released a pent-up breath. "You won't have to be baptized — just a profession of faith and confession. Then you can consume the body — I mean, join in the Eucharist."

Mrs. Mora looked down and fiddled with the hymnal.

I patted her hand. "It's all right. I know it's not really flesh."

She looked at me and gave a distressed smile. "But Virginia, it's symbolic only for Protestants. Not in the Catholic faith. Once the bread has been sanctified by the priest, it is very much the body of Christ. You consume His flesh, drink His blood, and accept His divinity."

Father O'Rourke's voice filled the tiny sanctuary. "*Quod ore sumpsimus, Domine, pura mente capiamus.*"

I looked at the translation to fight a stab of panic. *What has passed our lips as food, Lord, may we possess in purity of heart.*

"But you won't taste flesh or blood or bone," Mrs. Mora said. "It still tastes like bread. It's part of the miracle of the Eucharist. Sister Rosa was supposed to explain all of this."

I shook my head. The Sister was probably just as concerned for my sensitivity as Mrs. Mora.

I looked at the crucifix. *This is your first test, isn't it? But you can't*

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test me like you did Job. After the mountains, you know I can withstand anything.

I cocked my head. Christ's face seemed different. I squinted, trying to see through the haze of incense. His eyes were open again, and the crown of thorns was gone. His beard was longer, and his face was even more gaunt than before.

I forced down a scream and tugged on Mrs. Mora's dress. "Do you see anything wrong with the crucifix? Look at the face."

She studied it for a moment. "No one knows how Christ actually looked. You see a lot of different faces on crucifixes."

She couldn't see it, but that wasn't her fault. You had to battle Satan before you could recognize his devices. The Enemy had followed me from the mountains and had taken the feral face of that awful Hessian, Louis Keseberg.

I stiffened as the wooden head swiveled to look at me. His lips moved and a whisper found my ears. "It's too late for you, Virginia. You've tasted unsanctified flesh. You belong to my army, not His. And our battle for California is about to begin."

I grew dizzy and closed my eyes. *The battle's long over. You should've stayed buried in the mountains.*

A bang at the back of the sanctuary caused me to open my eyes. I looked back, along with the rest of the parishioners, to see a young ranchhand in filthy work clothes standing by the open doors. He fought labored breathing. "They found gold at Sutter's Mill!"

I lifted my skirt and dodged a pile of horse manure. Sutter's Fort wasn't nearly as modern as Springfield, and I missed the conveniences of gas lighting and street sweepers. But the warm sunny winters more than compensated for rough living.

A man, unkempt, smelly, and toting a basket of otter furs, smiled as he walked by. Papa was right — there were endless ways to make a living in California, depending on how hard you were willing to work and what unpleasantries you were able to endure. I used to worry about having lost all of the cattle, but not anymore. A year had passed since our rescue from the mountains, and Papa's work at Sutter's Mill had afforded us a house next to Hock Farm.

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It was a good thing Captain Sutter was a Christian. All these men streaming in from the States with pockets full of money — it was a troublesome combination. But the Captain didn't allow alcohol to be sold at the fort, and he was most intolerant of gambling and women who made gain of their loose virtue.

I stopped and looked back at the worn paddock that was used for morning muster on sunny days. Odd. There were usually soldiers coming, going, or sitting in front of the barrack having a smoke. If I didn't fend off at least one marriage proposal during a visit I considered it a wasted trip. Today — nothing.

I ducked into Mackey's Store.

A wide brown dress topped with a bun of blonde hair was busy shelving canned beans. Doris turned and smiled. "Virginia. Your mother was in just this morning. Did she forget something?"

I shook my head and glanced around. "Where's Mackey?"

"Gone!"

She wheeled and returned to stacking. The cans clacked as she put her weight into her work. "Damn fool! Off with a bunch of men to find their fortune. Can you believe it? Not three days after some kid finds gold up in the hills and the whole valley's gone loco."

She stopped and looked at me. I noticed her eyes were puffy and red. "Forgetting the good solid work that brought him out here, paid for this place along with our wagons and horses."

Doris turned to the counter where some loose tobacco lay next to an open tin can. She wiped her hands on her apron. "And for what? To chase a dream? California's about hard work, not easy riches."

"Is that where all the soldiers are?"

She nodded and started sweeping up tobacco with her hand.

"But who's guarding the fort? What if there's trouble? What if someone gets stranded in the mountains again?"

She dumped tobacco into the can and closed the lid. "Well, there you have it, girl. A man can be as dumb as a horse. Dangle a carrot in front of his eyes and he'll go right off a cliff. Guess it's up to you and me. I'm as strong as any man, and Lord knows you have history tracking around those mountains."

I shivered. "I hope it doesn't come to that. I don't ever want to go back

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into the mountains again. Can't Captain Sutter do something? Order the men back to work?"

"The Captain's up at the mill trying to keep squatters off his property — mostly his own men. Isn't that a dandy? He hires these men, clothes and feeds them, and then they turn on him. It's devil's gold. Brings out the worst in folks. A lot of them are so-called Christians. And what do you think is going to follow?"

I shrugged.

"Every slacker, sinner, charlatan, and shyster is going to come riding over the mountains to get a share of that gold. And every harlot in the country will be hot on their heels."

MY OWN HEELS pounded the boardwalk. I had stayed too long at Mackey's just to hear bad news, and now I was in danger of being late to the Catholic ladies' social.

So it would be a war. The horrible vision in church had been right, but God wasn't defenseless. I'd seen it in the mountains.

I must have been too deep in thought. I came upon a man, his back turned, and had to skid to a halt to avoid a collision.

He turned and greeted me with a toothy grin and vacant eyes. "The end of the world is at hand."

"Keseberg!"

His grin faded, and although his dust-covered, reeking body was only a few feet away, he squinted as if he needed glasses. "Virginia Reed?"

"You know it's me! You tried to convince the party to hang my father back in the Sierra Nevadas! Did the mountains scatter your brains?"

His eyes drifted as mine sometimes did when those awful memories took hold. "Why didn't they listen? We should've hanged him." He babbled a couple of words in German.

I considered launching myself at him, but his fleas kept me at bay. "If they had, no one would've ridden ahead to the fort and brought back help. How many more would've died? How many more would you have eaten?"

His eyes shifted to me. "I only did what was necessary to survive. We all did."

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"That's a lie! You murdered Levinah Murphy. Captain Sutter's men found her jewelry in your pockets and her body butchered in your cabin!"

"Missus Murphy." His eyes wandered again. "Funny, her meat was actually sweet to the taste."

My hand lashed.

Keseberg staggered back and rubbed his cheek. "I underestimate your strength, young one. But it's a bit hypocritical, don't you think?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" My voice cracked with rage.

His smile deepened. "Virginia. Half the party died in the Sierra Nevadas. The Donners are still up there — their scattered bones, anyway."

"Shut your mouth!"

"Weren't the Donners your friends? Didn't you all come from Illinois in the same wagon train?"

I could only give a strangled hiss.

"And what did you feel when you placed their flesh on the fire and ate it? You hate me because you can't bear your own guilt."

I glanced around. The dirt street and boardwalks were still empty. "Turn your other cheek, Keseberg. My Christian attitude just ran out."

Keseberg laughed. "Why are you acting so righteous? Who are you trying to impress?" He glanced at the fort's muster hall where the Catholic ladies were meeting. "Were you going to that Catholic *sitzung*? You still think you saw God in the mountains? How arrogant! The rest of us met the devil and you met God. Well, don't waste your time — the Catholics don't take cannibals."

"I never did. I never did!" Fury was making me light-headed so I turned and stalked down the boardwalk. It was too late to make a dignified entrance to the meeting, and I was too angry to make good company.

Keseberg called after me. "The end of the world is at hand! California will eat her whole!"

I spotted a work-hand as I rode up to the church. He was set to chopping away at the brush creeping up on the north wall. The poor man was overmatched, with nothing but a tomahawk he must have bought before coming over the mountains. He hacked away as if he could hold back nature. Two miles from the fort, nature was still in charge.

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I gave a start when he turned. It was Father O'Rourke, sweat soaking through the chest and armpits of his white shirt.

He smiled. "Thought I heard a horse. I was hoping it was Charles Murphy coming to help me with this overgrowth. How are you, Virginia?"

He had a sing-song accent just like Papa's — straight from Ireland.

I dismounted and tied Jeebers to the picket fence that bordered the church grounds. "I'm fine, Father. And I'll be glad to help."

He looked me up and down. "Not in that nice dress you're not."

He took off his work gloves and sat on the church stoop. I joined him.

"Did you bring a letter from your father?"

I shook my head. "Papa's being stubborn."

"He's Irish Protestant, isn't he?"

"Yes."

There was a strange sadness in the Father's eyes. "I'll still need his permission to continue with your conversion. Otherwise, you'll have to wait until you're older."

"I'll work on him," I said, brushing road dust off my dress. "I thought you were a work-hand when I first rode up."

He glanced at the overgrowth. "Lost my trunk on the voyage to New York. It had all of my frocks in it. The Church was in such a hurry to get more priests into California, I didn't have time to get new ones. The one I use now is borrowed from Father Rodriguez."

"Maybe Missus Mora could make you a new one."

He shook his head. "I left my measurements with a priest in New York. He'll send some new ones along soon enough." He looked at me. "Speaking of Missus Mora, she said you didn't come to the Catholic ladies meeting yesterday. If you want to show God your commitment, you'll have to try harder than that."

"I had a run-in with Louis Keseberg. I should've ignored him, but I let him bait me. He said I was a cannibal, same as him." I looked into the Father's eyes. "I slapped him, and I'm truly repentant."

I had the impression he was holding back a laugh. "There'll be plenty of confessions in your future. No one is without sin. We'll worry about penance after you become a Catholic."

"Do you think I'm a cannibal, Father?"

"No, lass. If you say you're not, then I believe you."

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"Do you believe in the devil? A real flesh-and-bone monster who wants to destroy God's creation?"

He gave me a long look. "You have to ask? I'm a priest."

"That's good. Because I do too. He did horrible things up in the mountains. I saw it. And I think he's here among us in California."

"You're talking about this gold find, aren't you?"

I nodded.

He looked over my shoulder toward the mountains. "On that we agree, lass. I've seen sensible men leave their jobs and families and go traipsing off with nothing more than a mule and a pick. All in search of a golden idol."

"But I've seen God too. I've seen Him beat the devil."

He smiled. "This part of the story I've heard from Patrick Breen."

"And none better to tell it," I said. "Every night while we were stuck in the mountains, Mama and I would go to Mister Breen's cabin — mind you, we'd run out of food weeks earlier and were down to eating tree bark and tallow. He'd pull out his Bible and find a verse that gave us enough strength to face another day. Then he'd end the night with a prayer, but not any 'thank you kindly, Lord' everyday prayer. He'd belt out a thank you so full of happiness it would scare the wolves away from the cattle bones. And he'd wail about the sinfulness of mankind as to make you wish you could crawl under a rock. By the time he'd finish, we were so full of Spirit the skin hanging off our bones and the barren state of our bellies were no longer a burden."

"And that's when you made your vow? That's when you decided to become a Catholic?"

"Yes. Mister Breen was Catholic, and I thought if being a Catholic made you that strong, so strong you could stand up to starvation while others had taken to eating the dead, then that was the religion for me."

"I have great respect for Mister Breen," Father O'Rourke said. "An Irishman cut from the old cloth like my own pap. He'd be so proud of you now."

"It does my heart good that you say so, Father. But the true nature of my visit is this Eucharist business."

He raised an eyebrow.

"I'm told it's the consumption of the flesh of Christ."

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Understanding seemed to take hold in his face. "Put your heart at rest, lass. It's not cannibalism."

"But it is the eating of His flesh, isn't it? No symbolism in the Catholic faith. 'Take, eat. This is my body,' He said."

His smile now looked practiced. "It's consumption of His spiritual flesh, not His physical flesh. It is a gift He left us to experience His divine nature on Earth. Don't fret."

"But I do fret, Father, I made another vow to God in the mountains — that I would never eat human flesh. I don't make such vows lightly."

"Nor should you, lass. But it's not cannibalism."

"Did God's son come to us in the flesh?"

He nodded, no longer smiling.

"When you bless the bread, is it just bread or is it Christ?"

"It is Christ. But Virginia, to become a Catholic, at some point you must partake in the Eucharist."

I looked away. "My vows are at odds."

Father O'Rourke put his work gloves back on and stood. "Then you must choose."

I LIKED SATURDAYS. The school at Sutter's Fort was closed on the weekend, and on sunny days Papa would let me take Jeebers to the Sacramento River and I'd fish the day away. Funny — Captain Sutter tried to name it Sutter's River when he was building the fort so many years ago. Mrs. Mora told me the Spanish would have none of that. They told the Captain their ancestors had named it nearly a hundred years earlier, and that was that.

But today was no day for fishing. I got out of bed, put on a dress, and went to look for Mama. I found her hoeing in the garden.

"About time you woke up. Get a hoe and start at the far side of that row of beans."

I picked up a hoe, but I started on the closer end of the row.

If she noticed, she didn't say anything. Her face was well shaded by a straw bonnet, and she kept her eyes on her work, pounding away at weeds and dirt clods. The hem of her blue dress was tinged brown with dust.

"Mama?"

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"Hm?"

"You remember back in the mountains, right at Christmas time?"

She didn't look up. "You know I don't like talking about the mountains."

"I know, but this is important. Do you remember? It was right after Betsy Donner died. I thought you'd be too sad to even remember Christmas, but the next day, you put on your best smile and cooked us a Christmas meal."

"I don't remember." Her voice was strange, hollow. She kept hoeing.

"How could you not remember? We hadn't eaten proper food in weeks, and we were living off tallow that made us sick half the time. And this Christmas meal comes out of nowhere like a gift from heaven."

She worked faster and began to move away.

I threw down my hoe and marched in front of her.

She stopped and looked at me. Her eyes were wide and her face frozen.

"That Christmas stew, Mama. The onions were mostly rotten and the broth was made from boiled leather, but where did that meat come from?"

"Tripe from the oxen." Her words were a tremble, just above a whisper.

"It wasn't tripe!" I grabbed her hoe and yanked it out of her hands and threw it aside.

She stepped back and tried to hide a grimace and welling tears with her hands.

"There was blood-meat in that stew, Mama. Where'd it come from?"

"Oh honey. You've got to understand. We were going to die. I had to."

I couldn't stop my own tears. "What did you do, Mama?" I grabbed her shoulders. "What did you do to me?"

"It was Billy. I'm so sorry...sorry." She took a long suck of air and sobbed.

I let her go. "Billy?"

She dropped her hands and nodded, still crying. "I remembered where he'd died in the fall. I didn't have to dig through much snow since the wolves had done most of the work for me. They'd made off with most of the meat, but there was a clump of flesh left that was good for eating." She

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looked me in the eyes. "It was Christmas, Virginia. I had to make it special."

"Billy?" I started to laugh.

Mama looked at me, sniffling. When my laughing didn't stop, she planted her fists on her hips. "Have you gone crazy, girl? I just told you the most God-awful secret I kept buried in my heart and all you can do is laugh."

I recovered enough to fetch Mama's hoe and hand it back to her. "I just found out I ate my own pony." I picked up my hoe. "I feel like the weight of the world's been lifted off my shoulders."

Mama wiped her nose, gave me a cross look, and went back to work. "I suppose this has something to do with this Catholic nonsense you've taken up. Did that priest tell you to go and scare the dickens out of your mother?"

"It does have something to do with this *Catholic* business, and no, Father O'Rourke wouldn't ask anyone to do such a horrible thing. It's just...."

"What?"

"Nothing. I mean, I'm sorry for scaring you, and you did the right thing putting poor old Billy in the stew. I loved him, but there was no sense in us starving while the wolves were getting fat."

We worked away in silence for a little while.

"Your papa and I had a little talk this morning before he set off for the mill."

I stopped hoeing. "And?"

"Well, we both agreed that you're becoming a young lady now, and that you're not likely to let go of this Catholic vow of yours."

I held my breath.

"You're old enough to make this decision on your own. He wrote a letter for the priest and put it on the table."

I dropped my hoe and charged for the house. I heard Mama call after me. "You can't finish your hoeing first?"

I didn't answer. I found the letter and ran to the stable for Jeebers. Mama was still in the garden gawking at me as I rode by. "I'll be back in an hour, I promise." I dug my heels into Jeebers and shouted. "Thank you, Mama! And tell Papa I love him!"

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* * *

"Virginia Reed! Stop riding that horse like a man!"

"I'm sorry, Sister Beatrice." I really wasn't sorry. Not even Catholic yet and I was piling up sins like an undertaker piling up gold teeth.

I dismounted and pushed my dress down to cover my legs. I'd forgotten about putting on riding trousers under my dress when I started out. Had there been soldiers about when I rode into the fort, I would've dismounted at the gate and led Jeebers in by the rein. Marriage proposals were one thing; I could brush those off by the bushel. But I didn't know what I'd do if a soldier tried to encourage some sort of base behavior from me. Maybe I'd run away. Maybe I'd slap him like I did Louis Keseberg.

As it was, the soldiers were still neglecting their duties and out digging for gold. All I had to endure was a cross Sister Beatrice.

I held tight to Jeebers even though he was in no mood for wandering. I'd given him quite a ride from home. "I'm trying to find Father O'Rourke. No one answered at his cabin so I came to the fort hoping he was here." I knew he sometimes held meetings with the Sisters at their dormitory on the fort grounds, and I didn't want to ride the extra miles to the church if I could help it.

The Sister's eyes blazed. "I should speak to your mother about your poor habits. Half the men around here haven't seen an unmarried woman for over a year. If they catch a glimpse of you with your dress hiked up over your knees...."

"Please, Sister Beatrice. I have to find the Father. My papa is letting me join the church."

The Sister worked her jaw in silence and gave me a cold stare. "Well, everyone is looking for the Father. He's at church, so you've got two miles to practice ladylike riding."

"Thank you." I led Jeebers toward the fort's gate. I was in too much of a hurry for *ladylike* riding, so I'd have to mount up out of the Sister's sight.

Something tickled my interest. I turned. "Sister?"

"Yes?"

"What did you mean when you said everyone was looking for the Father?"

"I mean that Louis Keseberg was looking for him all morning. Louis

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said he needed to be baptized a Catholic right away. Said he was dying or some such nonsense, and wanted to leave this world as a Christian." The Sister rolled her eyes. "He looked perfectly healthy to me."

"Louis Keseberg?"

She nodded. "That's why Father O'Rourke is at the church. He and Louis went out there for a baptism."

I patted Jeeber's neck to help calm my nerves. "Are they alone?"

"Yes." She paused and shook her head. "I mean no. Sister Rosa should be there this time of day. It's her turn to clean the church."

I didn't care if Sister Beatrice saw my bare legs. I ignored her yells as I kicked Jeebers into a gallop.

I SAW RISING SMOKE as I neared the church, and I was afraid I'd find nothing but charred timbers. When I arrived, the church was safe and sound. The smoke was coming from behind the building.

I tied off Jeebers, picked up a stout branch good for hitting, and ran around back.

There was Louis Keseberg, sitting on a log, as pleased as a cat with a mouse. He whistled a tune as he roasted a piece of meat at the end of a stick over a fire, which he must have built from the remnants of the church's construction. Two daggers were propped on a log next to him, both forged of black steel that glinted razor sharp. Their hilts looked of ivory, carved in the shape of some tormented soul in the last throes of life. They gave me a chill.

A groan caused me to turn toward the back wall of the church. There was Father O'Rourke, tied and laying on the ground. Blood leaked from his forehead, and there were red splatters on his white vestments. His eyes slowly drifted in my direction. "Run, Virginia. Get to the fort." His voice was weak and raspy.

Keseberg quit his whistling and turned to look at me. "Ah, Virginia. Fate decreed you would come, although I'm often a Doubting Thomas. Come have lunch with me." He withdrew the meat from the fire and poked at it with his finger.

My heart raced and I gripped my branch with both hands. "Keseberg, what have you done?" My voice sounded strange — high and shrill.

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"It's not so much what I've done, but what you're going to do. You wanted to join God's army since the mountains — indeed, you were meant to join, but Mister Breen got in the way. He may have put this Catholic obsession in your head, but fate won't be denied."

I took a step forward and raised the branch. He was a good twenty feet away and could reach those knives before I got a lick at him. "God's army? You've been hand-in-hand with the devil all this time, haven't you?"

Keseberg extended the meat back into the flames. "God...the devil. Really competing gods. Don't you find it ironic that they both require cannibalism of their soldiers? Maybe it's more than ironic. In any case, *my* god was quite upset that you denied him in the mountains. It seems there's something very special in you, though for the life of me, I can't see it."

He examined the meat again and turned to me. "It's time for you to join, Virginia."

My breath caught as I got a good look at the meat. I had seen its like before. I looked at Father O'Rourke, but other than a nasty gash on the forehead, he seemed fine.

"Run, lass," he said. "Stop thinking about it."

Keseberg laughed. "She won't run." Quick as a snake, he snatched up one of the knives and pointed it toward the Father, who lay about ten feet away. "She knows what I'll do to you if she does."

I forced myself to breathe. I had left all my tears in the mountains, but I had hate to burn. I imagined it showed in my eyes. "Where's Sister Rosa?"

Keseberg kept the knife poised at Father O'Rourke. "Where does one make a sacrifice? On the altar, my dear."

I ran to the church's back door.

"Don't look, Virginia," Father O'Rourke said. "It's horrible."

I opened the door and entered. It was horrible. For all the sharpness of those knives, Keseberg had been savage with the Sister's innards. I had once seen a sheep carcass after coyotes had finished with it. Very similar. Keseberg had even used part of the Sister's offal as a garland around the crucifix.

Father O'Rourke probably expected wailing when I came back outside, but I was sure Keseberg knew better. He now stood over the Father with the knife ready to strike. "Throw the branch on the fire, Virginia."

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Keseberg was still too far away for me to make a charge. He had it all figured out.

I glanced at the log he had been sitting on as I walked to the fire. The other knife was gone. I tossed the branch in the flames, and it began to crackle. "Afraid of a sixteen-year-old girl?"

"The mountains made you strong, Virginia, and I like all of the advantages." Keseberg stepped around the sitting log and approached. The roasted piece of Sister Rosa was in his other hand. He presented it. "Join."

Father O'Rourke rolled on his side to face us. "Don't do it, Virginia. It's forbidden — a terrible sin."

Keseberg gave a soulless laugh. "Her strength works against her now, priest. Her spirit sustained her in the mountains, but now she'll sacrifice herself to save you."

"Hold it steady." I grabbed his arm to stop him from moving, although my shaking wasn't improving matters.

He pointed the knife at my heart. "Turn back now and it will cost both your lives."

I knew there was no turning back.

"*Corpus Domini nostri Jesu Christi...*"

May the body of our Lord Jesus Christ...

I looked back at Father O'Rourke. A blessing for Satan's feast?

Keseberg's voice turned harsh. "A wasted prayer, priest. You can't sanctify this meat. The knives I used came straight from Satan's heart. It can't be blessed."

"*...custodiat animam tuam in vitam aeternam.*"

... preserve your soul unto everlasting life.

"No hesitation, Virginia," Keseberg said. "Now is the time."

I still held his arm. I pulled it closer.

"Amen," Father O'Rourke said.

Maybe Keseberg was right. Father O'Rourke's blessing couldn't overcome the evil of the knives...

...had he been trying to bless the meat.

I bit deeply, and my mouth filled with the taste of buttered crust and stone-baked bread.

Keseberg howled and staggered back. He dropped his knife to hold his

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wrist and dangling hand. Bone and vessels were severed cleanly, following the shape of my mouth. Blood spouted to his heart's rhythm.

I shoved him, and he went toppling over a log.

He looked up at me. His feral look was gone and his eyes were wide. "Stay away!"

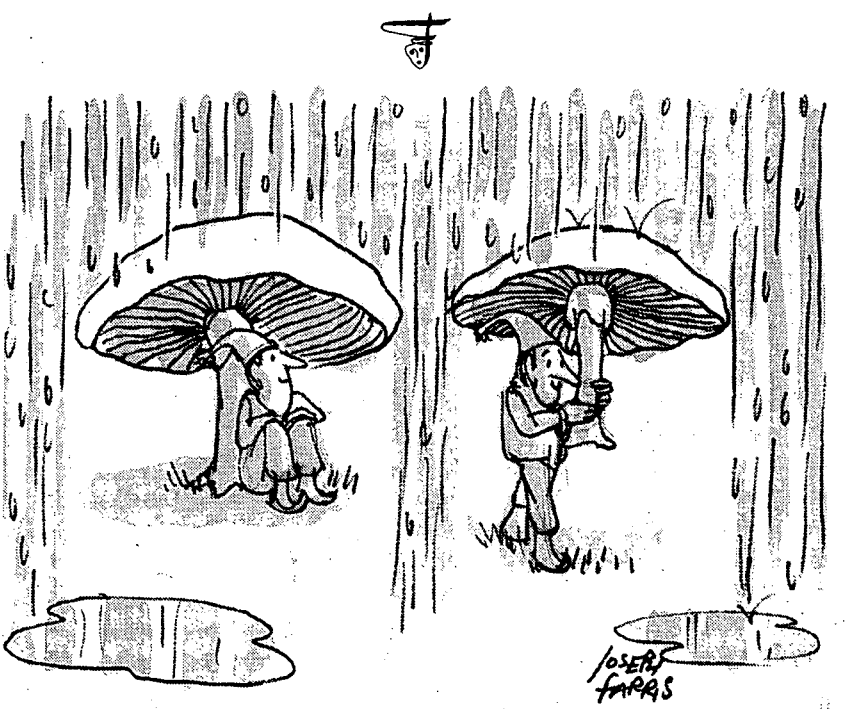
I leapt on him. Grabbing his shoulder with one hand, I forced his head back with the other. His screaming ended as I bit through his windpipe and part of his throat — this time, earthy rye. My mouth was so full of bread I couldn't swallow. I put my lips to a broken, pumping artery in his neck.

The sweetest of wines.

The voice of Father O'Rourke rose behind me. "*Corpus tuum, Domine, quod sumpsi, et Sanguis quem potavi, adhaereat visceribus meis.*"

May Your body, Lord, which I have eaten and Your blood which I have drunk, cleave to my very soul.

I turned to him, sated. "Look, Father. Look. I've chosen."



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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

TIME WARPS, UNDYING LOVE, AND LIVING DOLLS

GENERALLY speaking, American movies these days are less records of a time — a reading taken on the public humor, a register of the emotional temperature of the nation at a particular moment — than they are appeasements designed to comfort an audience, to assuage its appetite for truth, beauty, etc., by offering the celluloid equivalent of a doggie treat. Take, for instance, the latest Denzel Washington vehicle, *Déjà Vu*. You might think that a motion picture that cites Katrina, 9-11, and Oklahoma City, and begins with a horrific act of terrorism, would scarcely typify this kind of filmic stroking, but it most assuredly does. The destruction of the New Orleans ferry, the *Sen. Alvin T. Stumpf*, with which the film opens, is rendered with a loving pyrotechnic splendor that makes it plain that Hollywood has overcome its stated reluctance to depict the mass murder of Americans, more than five hundred of them in this instance...and not only have they overcome it, but they have chosen to portray it with a relish previously reserved for the climactic scenes of James Bond movies wherein the villain is reduced to a scatter of dark atoms. As the flames billow upward, as the burning bodies of sailors, small children, and pretty moms pinwheel into the Mississippi, one expects to hear a coloratura soprano in full throat backed by the inspirational stylings of the Welch Men's Choir, celebrating the event in glorious song, and the reaction provoked is not revulsion, but more on the order of, *Zowie! That blew up* real *good.*

Into the resultant carnage of bloody bandages and scorched dolls

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and body bags like black fruit comes ATF Agent Doug Carlin (Washington), a man, we are told, of extraordinary competence, capable of discerning clues in a crime scene that others might overlook. One such clue is the corpse of a beautiful young woman, Claire Kuchever (Paula Patton), her remains mixed in with the victims of the explosion, but who apparently died some time previous to the terrorist act. Carlin is offered the chance to join a special FBI unit bent on solving the crime. Though the Federal Government proved incapable of busing Katrina victims out of the Superdome in a timely fashion, we are supposed to accept that they have been able, in short order, to mount a massive and highly technical operation that allows them to look back in time four and a half days. Some suspensions of disbelief are nigh on impossible to manage.

Déjà Vu is a chase picture and, as long as you keep munching your popcorn and don't care too much that the premise of time travel (or viewing the past) is presented as though it were the byproduct of an eyes-closed wish and a magic bean, the initial two-thirds of the film make for a fairly serviceable thriller. As Carlin tumbles to the fact that the unit is, indeed, looking into the past (via a wormhole, of course — "wormhole" being techspeak for magic bean), he becomes increasingly taken with Claire, as obsessed with saving her as he is with solving the crime. There are some clever moments along the way, most notably a car chase in which Carlin, equipped with a helmet device that allows him to see with one eye into the past, follows a car driven by the terrorist (a Timothy McVeigh-like James Caviezel whose motives are left unplumbed, though it's clear he thinks the government sucks) four nights previously while dealing with the perils of rush hour traffic in the here-and-now. Director Tony Scott *(Top Gun, Domino)*, a man who never met a jump-cut he didn't like, here demonstrates admirable restraint in his use of MTV techniques, but this relative economy of style is more than compensated for by the excesses of the script, which — during the third act — leaps from implausible to the purely risible in the service of providing us with a happy ending. Despite the effulgence of the explosion that begins the picture, the larger issue of a world held hostage by fear is muted by the film's plot twists and techno-prattle. What are a few lives more or less, *Déjà Vu*

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seems to be saying, so long as Denzel winds up with the girl.

If *Déjà Vu* represents a basic staple of the American film industry, the standard-issue thriller with a feel-good message (in this case, terrorism can be defeated by technology. ...Hmm. Hasn't that been tried?) that follows the Syd Fields script model with a new element introduced every 8-10 minutes, etc., there are a number of recent genre films that have broken the mold, their way led by David Lynch's new *Inland Empire*, a film about filmmaking that is either so indulgent or so adventurous (with Lynch, as always, it's difficult to judge) that the auteur has been forced to distribute it himself. But perhaps the most anticipated non-blockbuster genre picture of the season is Darren Aronofsky's *The Fountain*, his first film in six years.

During those six years, Aronofsky has acquired the reputation of being something of a promiscuous developer. His name has been attached to such properties as *Batman Begins*, Frank Miller's *Ronin*, Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, and Theodore Roszak's exemplary thriller, *Flicker*. (He is, in fact, still attached to *Flicker*, and, hopefully, he will get the picture made, because it will take someone with Aronofsky's imagination to mount a film whose materials include a creepy 1940s cult director, Max Castle, and the invention of the motion picture by the Knights Templar in the fifteenth century.) Why then, when offered so many A-list projects, he chose to go with a less prestigious project remains a matter for conjecture ...though to be fair, *The Fountain* was intended as an A-list project, but lost half of its budget when Brad Pitt, who had signed on to star, decided (according to some) that one of the locations didn't suit his tanning requirements and dropped out.

Using as its source material a graphic novel written by Aronofsky, *The Fountain* begins in the sixteenth century with a bearded conquistador, Tomas (Hugh Jackman), ambushed in the rain forest by Mayan warriors, who drag him to a pyramid overlooking the Tree of Life, where their high priest waits to disembowel him. Which he proceeds to do, after first intoning, "Death is the path to awe," a sentiment that inadvertently calls to mind the philosophy of militant Islamic suicide bombers. Immediately thereafter, Tomas, now bald and beardless, appears to the high priest floating in a bubble, sitting in the lotus position, and zooms up,

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up, and away into outer space, to a spaceship shaped like a snow globe containing a living tree that is given to murmuring and twitching the fine hair covering its bark. Here Tomas, or rather Tom Creo, a twenty-sixth century shamanic figure/space traveler, engages in various activities such as tattooing himself with a fountain pen, eating the bark of the tree, and ignoring the several apparitions of his dead wife, all the while drawing closer to the site of the Mayan underworld, the Xibalba Nebula, its light wrapped around a dying star.

The main story revolves about Tommy (also Jackman, now possessed of a fine, disheveled head of hair but no beard), a present-day or near-future cancer researcher who is desperately seeking a cure for brain cancer, attempting to cure the tumor that is killing his wife, Izzi (Rachel Weisz), by experimenting on apes. He appears to be making significant progress, as a treatment involving the bark of a Central American tree has reversed the aging process in one test subject — but it may all be coming too late in the day to save Izzi. It turns out that the conquistador plotline is in actuality a novel Izzi is writing entitled *The Fountain*, and, as hope fades, she presents him with a copy of the book, handwritten in spectacularly neat cursive, and a bottle of ink and a fountain pen, and tells him that he must complete the novel by writing the final chapter. The book tells the story of Queen Isabel of Spain (also played by Weisz), who sends one of her conquistadors into the Guatemalan jungles to search for the Tree of Life. Tommy's day-to-day existence parallels that of the twenty-sixth century astronaut. When he loses his wedding ring, he tattoos a new one on his ring finger; when Izzi begs him to go for a walk in the new snow, he puts her off, claiming he has too much work to do. Ultimately, it becomes clear that the astronaut's plotline is the final chapter of the novel, finished by Tommy after Izzi's death, and that his (the astronaut's) death is Tommy's fantasy about his eventual reunion with Izzi.

Since its release, reviewers have been hating on *The Fountain* for its vapid metaphysics and soggy romanticism, but in truth its metaphysics are no less an exercise in pop philosophy and Jungian imagery than that which informed *2001: A Space Odyssey*, a picture to which it bears an architectural resemblance; and the love scenes

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between Jackman and Weisz are almost enough to ground the film.

Almost.

Yet with this ambitious a film, a near-miss is as good as a mile. So, while in its narrative design and mise en scène, its coherent image systems and gaudy, golden-hued cinematography (courtesy of Matthew Libatique), *The Fountain* aspires to brilliance, it is brought down by the sketchiness of its characters — they are just too thin to be compelling. Izzi is hardly more than a type, smiling bravely and beatifically in the face of her impending death, and Jackman spends far too much time weeping and trashing rooms in his frustration. Dr. Lillian Guzetti (Ellen Burstyn), the head of the research facility, is trotted out now and again to reprimand Tommy or warn him that he's working too hard and neglecting Izzi. The only other character to make an impression is Manny, a lab assistant, and this is because the actor, Ethan Suplee, also plays the brain-dead brother, Randy, on the TV sitcom *My Name Is Earl* — his presence led me (and this is entirely the fault of the viewer) to expect pratfalls and Dumb-and-Dumber-isms. In sum, your judgment of *The Fountain* will be limited by the extent to which you can appreciate the film in terms of what might have been.

Blood Tea and Red Strings is a stop-motion animated film that took its creator, Christiane Cegavske, thirteen years to make, and functions as a fairy tale and a piece of outsider art in which a doll gives birth to a full-grown bluebird and sunflowers wear skull faces. At sixty-nine minutes, the film is a bit slow, but it's nonetheless well worth your time. Told without dialogue, this elegantly composed story needs no words. The aristocratic and bitchy White Mice, the wealthiest creatures in the forest, commission the Oak Dwellers (sort of rats with beaks and piglike ears) to make them the most beautiful doll in the world. The Oak Dwellers fall in love with their Kabuki-faced creation and decide to keep it. The White Mice steal the doll and take it back to their decadent world (they live in a red chamber and play games with cards that appear to be blank, whereas the Oak Dwellers live amid the greens and golds of nature); the Oak Dwellers then set forth on a perilous journey to retrieve the doll. At the heart of the story lies a fable concerning race and class, but the charm of the film lies in

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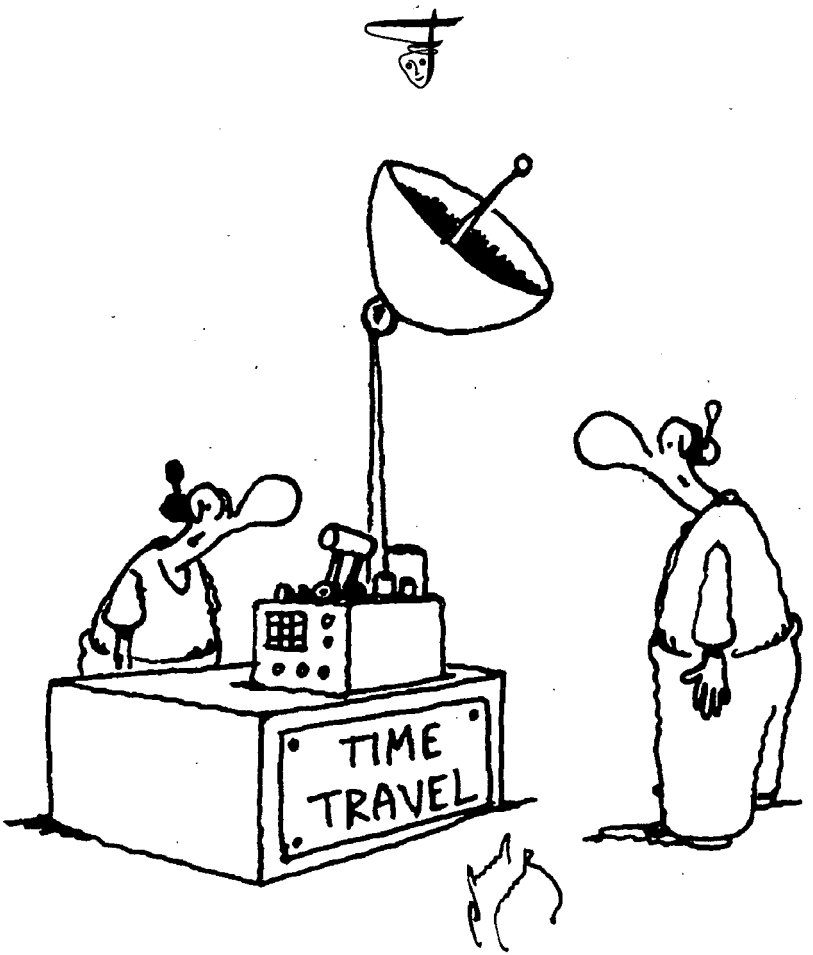
the unfolding of its fascinating, sometimes baffling, often creepy imagery, its narrative deployment of wise frogs and human-headed spiders and carnivorous flowers. Cegavske's movie is a miracle of obsessive craft, an absolutely captivating and challenging film.



"That's right, and you'll keep getting that déjà vu feeling until I win first prize at this science fair."

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*A trip to David Levine's Website (*http://www.spiritone.com/~dlevine/sf/*) reveals that in the three years since we last published his work, he has published stories in* Asimov's, Albedo One, Realms of Fantasy *and a variety of anthologies. One of those stories, "Tk'Tk'Tk'," won a 2006 Hugo Award. His latest tale is a charming look at a legend.*

Titanium Mike Saves the Day

By David D. Levine

V. An emergency radiation shelter near the asteroid Chiron, December 2144

"GRAMMA, I'M SCARED." The poor girl wasn't just scared, she was terrified. Behind a faceplate fogged with rapid breaths, her skin was pale and clammy and her sapphire-blue eyes twitched like small frightened animals.

Helen wasn't exactly calm herself. "Don't fret, Sophie," she said, but her own voice trembled. She muted her helmet mike and took a deep breath before continuing. "We'll be safe here." For a while, anyway, she added silently.

In all Helen Buchanan's seventy-eight years she'd never seen a solar flare so strong come on so fast. They'd had barely enough warning to reach this abandoned mining module before a storm of protons moving at near-lightspeed began to scour this sector of the Belt. And her lightweight two-seater jump bug offered almost no shielding against the radiation, so they

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were trapped here until the storm passed. Which might be hours, or days, or weeks.

"Now, you just try to keep calm," she told Sophie, "while I see what we have in the way of supplies." But the module's cupboards contained only dust. Its oxy tanks were still welded to the wall, but when she put her helmet against each one and tapped it with her hand light, all she heard was the dim *tink* of metal in vacuum.

That wasn't good. Not good at all.

She took another calming breath, then checked the oxy meter on her wrist: twenty-one hours at the current rate of consumption. She tweaked the mixture a little leaner; it might give her headaches, but that beat the alternative. "All right now, sugar, let me check your tanks." Helen turned Sophie around, stopping the rotation with a practiced tap on the shoulder as she bent to peer at the girl's tank-mounted meter. And gasped.

Only six hours left.

"W-what's wrong, Gramma?"

She considered her response while thinning Sophie's mix. Panic would drive the child's oxy consumption up, but she'd know if she was being lied to. She turned Sophie to face her and looked her straight in the eye. "Well, kiddo, we're a little light on the oxy. Now, most flares only last a few hours, but this one's a real whopper — no telling how long it'll go on." She reached behind herself and began unshipping her #3 tank. "So I'm going to give you some of mine. Hold still."

The emergency connector hose was too short, the light was giving out, and Helen hadn't done this kind of detail work with gloves on in years. But eventually she got everything connected together and bungeed the extra tank to the child's pack.

Sophie's meter now read ten hours.

Only four hours more? That tank would have kept Helen going for seven! The poor frightened child was gulping down the oxy like nobody's business.

This had to stop.

Standard practice was to use sleeping pills, but Sophie's bubblegum-pink suit lacked such grown-up supplies. She'd have to find another way.

Helen thought back to her days raising Sophie's mother, but no situation this worrisome had ever come up then. Then she thought back a little further....

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And she had just the thing.

"Sweetie, do you know about Titanium Mike?"

Sophie didn't reply, just shook her head slowly inside her helmet.

"Well then, looks like I need to fill in a few holes in your education." She drew Sophie to herself, chestplate against chestplate, so the girl could feel her voice in her bones, not just hear it filtered through radio. "Titanium Mike is...well, he's more a force of nature than a man, really. They say his father was Gravity and his mother was Vacuum."

"Is he going to come and help us?"

Helen considered the question for a moment. "Well, he might — you never can tell where old Mike might show up. When Cassandra Station was coming apart, he stuck the two halves back together with spit. And he's the one who stopped Ceres from spinning."

"Ceres doesn't spin. Everyone knows that."

"Not anymore! But back in the old days she rolled like a stuck gyro and it wasn't safe to get near. Mike lassoed her with a bungee cord and straightened her out."

Sophie looked mighty dubious at that. But dubious didn't use nearly as much oxy as panicked.

"No, really, it's true. If you don't believe me, you can ask Mike yourself the next time you see him. He's done all sorts of things. Why, when he was just a kid, he put rockets in his pockets and scrubbers in his rubbers and walked all the way around the Sun just to see where he'd come from."

At that, Sophie actually managed a weak little smile.

Helen smiled back at her. As she warmed to her subject, she found her own mood changing — the stories took her back to the early days of the Aurora Mining Company, when a certain amount of privation and danger was just a part of the job.

"Mike was born on Earth, but he never fit in there. He was a big man and always kept hitting his head on things, or tripping over his own big feet. One day he said to himself 'Why can't I just float around and avoid all this bother?' So he decided to go to space, where he could do just that.

"But he realized he'd need something to breathe when he got there, so he took an old pickle jar, stuck some seaweed on the bottom, and screwed it onto the neck of his suit, and that was the beginning of

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hydroponics. Then he found some old thrusters that were lying around, but he was too big for just one thruster to lift so he stacked up a few of them on top of each other, and that was the beginning of the multi-stage lifter.

"When he got to space all the people were just drifting around with nothing to do. So he took some old foil food wrappers and spun them together into a big shiny dish to concentrate the sunlight, and then he went down to Luna and started throwing rocks into the hot spot, and that was the beginning of solar smelting.

"Mike took the smelted ore and started making cans and spikes and bubbles and donkeys and all kinds of other things that no one had ever seen before, but they didn't know how to use them. So Mike started to teach them...."

And so it went, the end of each tale sparking the beginning of the next, and pretty soon Sophie started asking questions, and it wasn't long before she was contributing her own outlandish details. Then Helen's voice grew tired and they both slept for a while, and when Sophie woke up she asked for another Mike story.

When the all-clear sounded, somehow it had gotten to be twelve hours later. And Sophie still had more than an hour left in her tank.

IV. A mining facility near the asteroid Vesta, October 2088

"Don't give me that bull!"

Orchekowski brought his massive fist down on the metal table with a resounding blow that knocked a squeeze-bulb of coffee loose from its grip-pad, but nobody at the table noticed the bulb as it tumbled away — they were all busy shouting at each other.

Javon Carter, floating near the door, snagged the bulb from the air with one long brown hand. He stared at it a moment, then stuck it to the wall beside him with a sigh. The canteen was the largest space they had, and it still wasn't big enough to contain the tension between the two groups of miners — as thick and foul as the air that puffed from the helmet rings of their well-worn suits with every vehement gesture.

"Listen to me!" Orchekowski was yelling over and over. The muscular sapper had enough lung power to overtop the others. "We need to take what we can and get out!"

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"No way!" Enriquez shouted back, veins standing out on his forehead. "We've all worked too hard to give up now!"

Orchekowski spread his hands. "Face it — Aurora's over."

"Aurora is *not over!*" That was Buchanan, a feisty red-headed kid who emphasized her words with a finger in Orchekowski's face. "We've pulled out of worse situations than this."

The big man ignored the intruding finger. "Maybe," he said, "but we didn't have an alternative before." He glared at Buchanan, who stared back, her sapphire-blue eyes defiant. "We'd be insane to pass up this offer."

Enriquez made a rude noise. "Pennies on the dollar."

Griswold, the gray-haired accountant, rolled his eyes at that. "It's the best we're going to get!" Orchekowski nodded vigorously as Griswold continued. "Hardcastle is the only other company in a position to exploit our claims. No one else would even touch us!"

A half-dozen voices exploded at that, and Carter shook his head. This argument was going nowhere — running in circles and feeding on itself. If it wasn't settled soon, and decisively, it would tear the group apart.

Carter was just an engineer, but someone had to do something about this situation, and it looked like it had to be him. He thought back to his first job in space, and his favorite boss...how would Ray Chen have handled it?

"That's exactly why we have to stay independent!" Buchanan shouted over the others, gaining the floor for a moment. "Hardcastle has already bought out every other molybdenum miner in the Belt. If they get us too...."

Griswold waved his hands. "They've just proved they're the only ones who can make moly pay."

"We can —" began Buchanan, and "Exactly!" screamed Orchekowski, and "Bull!" said Enriquez, and ten other voices were all raised at once...

...and Carter pressed his thumb over the relief port on his airpack and goosed the nitro valve. The escaping gas shrilled into the tumult with a screaming whistle that brought the argument to a sudden halt.

Everyone looked at Carter. "'Scuse me," he said, with a hand on his stomach as though he'd just burped, and a few people chuckled at that. The rest simply waited for him to speak. His forty years in the Belt had earned him a certain amount of respect.

"I know you're all kind of upset," he said at last, "but I was just

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reminded of a little story that might help to put this situation into perspective. It's a Titanium Mike story."

"What the...?" snarled Orchekowski, but several people shushed him. Others just looked baffled.

"For those of you who don't know him," Carter said, "Titanium Mike was nothing less than the greatest Belter who ever scratched his helmet on a rock. They say his father was the Sun and his mother was the Moon. And a long time ago, when everything in the System flew about every which way and no one could ever find their way from one place to another, Mike decided he ought to do something about it."

Carter noticed Griswold nodding thoughtfully — he'd recognized the story. Bingo.

"Mike went to the Sun," Carter continued, "and said, 'Old Sol, it sure would be easier on everyone if things had some kind of predictable orbits.' And the Sun said, 'You're right, Mike, and you know there's nothing I wouldn't do for you.' So the Sun puffed and grunted and sent out flares and winds and magnetic fields and jostled all the planets and asteroids into orbit around himself. Mike thanked him kindly, and the Sun was satisfied because now he was in the center of everything.

"But now that everything was going around the Sun, things were crossing each other's orbits and crashing into each other all the time, and...," Carter paused and gnawed on his lower lip for a bit. "...and you know, I'm having a little trouble remembering what comes next. Griswold, can you help me out here?"

Griswold gave Carter a look that said *you sly old dog, I know exactly what you're doing*, but what he said was "I do believe I can."

The gray-haired accountant took a pull from his coffee bulb and said, "Now that all that stuff was going around the Sun, everything was crashing into everything else all the time. So Mike went to Jupiter and said, 'Old Jove, it sure would be easier on everyone if things didn't cross each other up like that.' And Jupiter said, 'You're right, Mike, and you know there's nothing I wouldn't do for you.' So Jupiter threw his weight around and tugged and pulled until all the planets and asteroids were orbiting clockwise in the plane of the ecliptic. Mike thanked him kindly, and Jupiter was satisfied because now he didn't have all kinds of planetesimals and things bumping into him.

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"But now that everything was spread across a big plane instead of going around in a tight little knot in the middle, it took a lifetime and a half just to walk from Venus to Mars." Then he pulled a fresh bulb of coffee from the dispenser on the table and tossed it to Enriquez. "Enriquez, you know this one, don't you?"

The dark-skinned little pilot caught the bulb. "Yeah," he said as he pulled the tab. "Mike went to Ceres and said, 'Old Cere, it sure would be easier on everyone if there were a quicker way to get from one place to another.' And Ceres said, 'You're right, Mike, and you know there's nothing I wouldn't do for you.' So Ceres called all her sisters together, and they hustled and bustled and fiddled and twiddled until there were orbital paths all over the System, with Hohmann transfer ellipses and slingshot maneuvers and all the other things that make the trip go a little faster. Mike thanked her kindly, and Ceres was satisfied because now people would have to visit her and her sisters all the time if they wanted yttrium to keep their fusion drives going and carbos to eat on the trip.

"And Mike looked out on the System...and realized he'd made a mess of everything. Because now, even though you could be sure where your destination was and which way it was going, it took years to get there even with the best orbital path and a full tank of hydro. But he couldn't go back to his friends and ask them to undo what they'd worked so hard to do at his request." He paused and sipped his coffee, then cocked an eyebrow at Orchekowski. "You know how it ends, don't you?"

Orchekowski just glared back at him.

"C'mon," Buchanan said. "Didn't you grow up on Titanium Mike stories, just like the rest of us?"

"I know you did," said Carter. "I've heard you telling 'em to your kids over the radio."

The big sapper looked at the expectant faces all around him, then let out a sigh. "Oh, all right," he said.

"Mike went to Pluto," he said — and he said it in his best storytelling voice, a voice as big and rough and full of vinegar as Mike himself — "crotchety old Pluto, who was so cold and distant and independent that he didn't exactly orbit the Sun and didn't exactly stay in the plane of the ecliptic and wasn't exactly easy to get to even after everything else had changed, but he always was a hard-headed practical sort and full of good

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advice. And Mike said to Pluto, 'Old Plute, it sure would be easier on everyone if things were the way they'd been before.'

"And Pluto said, 'You're right, Mike, and you know there's nothing I wouldn't do for you...but I'm just a tired old planet, and this is all I have to offer.' And he handed Mike a thing that looked like a little shiny pebble. 'What's this?' said Mike. 'It's a little thing called Persistence,' said Pluto.

"So Mike thanked Pluto kindly, and dogged down his helmet and set to work. And ever since then, whenever people have wanted things to be better they've had to work them out for themselves. It's a hard job, but with Persistence all things are possible."

Several people applauded Orchekowski's performance, and he made a little bow in the air. Then he told another story, the one about how Mike climbed from LEO to L5 on a cosmic string, which reminded Enriquez of the bawdy one about how Titanium Mike and Satellite Sal made Venus spin backward...and Carter just floated there in the corner, sipped his coffee, and smiled.

Quite a while later, someone remembered why they'd gathered, and called for a vote. It was nineteen to zero to reject Hardcastle's offer.

III. A rented office at Chaffee Station in Low Earth Orbit, July 2052

"It certainly is an...interesting proposal."

Raymond Chen forced himself to smile broadly at that, just as though he hadn't heard the same reaction from five other venture capitalists this month, and just as though all five of them hadn't eventually said no. "Glad you like it," he said, and busied himself shutting down the projector. Orbital diagrams and financial projections faded from the air like unfunded dreams.

Valerie Itsui, principal of Itsui Investments, sat with fingers steepled and a stiff unreadable expression on her face.

"Well....," said Jan, at the same time Kellie said, "Well then..." The twins shared a momentary glance, then Kellie continued, "...why don't we adjourn to the outer office? I believe lunch is ready." Ray swallowed; the Griffin sisters almost never stepped on each other's lines. That they would do so now showed just how nervous they were.

As the twins and Ms. Itsui moved toward the door, the fourth and

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newest member of the fledgling Asteroid Metals Extraction Corporation touched Raymond's hand. "Might as well start packing up now," Javon muttered low. "I was watching her the whole time you were talking and I swear her face never moved once."

"You just leave her to me," Ray replied, and clapped Javon on the shoulder. But after Javon turned and followed the other three, Ray pursed his lips and sighed.

Money was getting tight, for the industry as a whole as much as for AMEC. The nearby Moon and the resource-rich satellites of Saturn and Jupiter had been snapped up years ago, and after the recent series of space development bankruptcies some people were saying the scattered rocks of the Asteroid Belt could never be successfully exploited. But Ray was convinced that the twins' novel refinery technology could make mining the asteroids for molybdenum possible, young Javon's engineering talents could make it practical, and his own money skills could make it profitable. First, though, he had to sell that concept to the people with the money, and so far he'd failed.

What was he doing wrong? The technology would work, he was sure of it. The financials were rock-solid. He'd put every bit of supporting data he could into his presentation. So why weren't the big fish biting?

Ray drummed his fingers on the table. Maybe...maybe he was using the wrong bait.

Venture capitalists like Valerie Itsui spent their days in meetings like this one, looking at charts full of optimistic projections. What made the difference between the one that caught her attention and the many that didn't?

Not data. Dreams.

He had to make her *believe in the dream*. He had to make her feel the same excitement he felt for AMEC's plan.

The same excitement that had driven him into space development in the first place.

Ray nodded to himself, tucked the folded projector into a pocket, and stepped into the outer office.

He made his selections from the tray of sushi laid out on the reception desk, then sat next to Ms. Itsui. "So," he said, "what made you decide to invest in space development in the first place?"

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She wiped her lips with a precisely folded napkin before replying. "Profit, Mr. Chen. There's more upside potential in space than anywhere on Earth, even now."

"It wasn't the money for me," Ray said. The twins looked at each other in surprise. "Oh, sure, I got my MBA, because I didn't have the head for science or the guts for zero-gee construction. But ever since I was a teenager I wanted to go to space." He leaned forward in his chair. "Because of the stories."

They were all looking at him now, giving him their complete attention in a way he'd never managed with any number of rosy financial projections. Ms. Itsui cocked her head in consideration of his words; the others were flat astonished. This was a side of himself he'd never revealed before.

"What stories, Mr. Chen?"

"Tales of exploration and adventure and derring-do, Ms. Itsui. Do you know the name Titanium Mike?"

"I can't say that I do."

Ray settled back in his chair. "Well, most folks say Mike is just a myth. But the fact is that he's been kicking around the System since Branson Station was just a loose mess of bolts and girders. His father was a thruster and his mother was an asteroid, and he's the one who figured out how to spin a station for gravity without making everyone inside dizzy."

"I hadn't been aware of that being a problem." It wasn't, of course, but a twinkle of interest had appeared in her eyes.

"Mike's responsible for a lot of things that people take for granted today. For instance, he's the one who cleared the Cassini Gap."

Ms. Itsui set down her chopsticks. "And how did he manage that?"

"Well, it all started one day when Mike got a call from a friend of his on Titan. 'We're in a bad way,' he said. Now Mike wasn't the kind of guy to just sit around when a friend was in trouble, so he grabbed a pony-can and threw it in the direction of Saturn, then he climbed in real quick before it got away, and it carried him off to Titan as neat as you please."

Javon was gaping like a trout now, and Kellie was giving Ray an I-hope-you-know-what-you're-doing look. But Jan got it.

"When he got there," Ray continued, "his friend said, 'Thank goodness you're here, Mike; we've got plenty of atmosphere here, but there's

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nothing to eat and we're plum miserable.' Well, there's nothing that matters more to an old space-hog like Mike than a good hot meal. He snagged a nickel-iron asteroid that happened to be drifting by, and he took his trusty ore hammer and he pounded it into a skillet — eighteen meters across and with a handle twenty-two meters long. Then he pulled out his hand thruster, which was ten meters wide and pushed a million and three centigees, and headed off to look for something to put in that skillet.

"He looked at Iapetus, but there wasn't anything there but ice. And he looked at Dione, but there wasn't anything there but rocks. He looked at every one of Saturn's moons and moonlets, but there wasn't anything there to eat at all. So he dug in his heels to kill his orbital velocity, dropped right down to Saturn himself, and took a big bite out of the old man's atmosphere. But it was cold and smelly, and none too filling besides, so he just spat it out."

At that Ms. Itsui actually smiled. Ray kept going.

"But there was one more place he hadn't tried, and that was the rings. Now, in those days people thought Saturn's rings were nothing but ice and rocks, but Mike had an idea that might not be the case. So he grabbed the rescue handle on the back of his suit and lifted himself up to the rings. The first ring was nothing but ice; the second one was nothing but rocks. But the third one wasn't ice, or rocks...it was all made up of carbo-nubs and jerkie-bits and other tasty things. He pulled out his skillet and filled it up, then took it back to Titan and cooked it up over one of the volcanoes there, and the people ate it all up and asked for seconds. So he went back and got another skilletful, and then another and another. Pretty soon that tasty ring was all gone, and the place it used to be is what we call the Cassini Gap. But Mike was always a little sloppy, and while he was scooping all that stuff out he scattered bits and pieces all over the place. So people have been extracting carbohydrates from Saturn's rings ever since."

There was a long pause then, with Ray and Javon and the twins all waiting for Ms. Itsui to speak. "I can see that this means a lot to you, Mr. Chen," she said at last.

"It means a lot to all of us, Ms. Itsui."

She set her plate aside and pulled out her datapad. "I'd like to take a closer look at some of your numbers."

"Of course."

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There was still a lot of work to do. But that was the moment that Ray knew she was hooked.

II. A corporate cubicle in Cocoa, Florida, April 2041

"Delete. Delete. Delete. Delete."

Tony Ramirez was pruning ideas. His desk was crowded with icons, each one representing an idea he'd invested five minutes or a day or a week on.

None of them were any good. He needed a fresh start.

He paused with his finger on the icon labeled "Embrace Space!" He was still fond of that slogan — the rhythm and rhyme were compelling, and the text treatment the graphic artists had come up with had a lot of snap. But the client thought it was "too pedestrian."

"Delete." The icon dissolved beneath his fingertip in a puff of pixels.

Damn the client, anyway. Damn all clients everywhere.

Tony stood and stretched. The clock in one corner of his desk read four o'clock...one more hour and it would be the weekend. Maybe he should knock off early, get in a little surfing.

He touched a control on his desk and the window blinds rotated, letting in the sun and the view. Just a few miles away, across the Indian River, one of the client's boosters stood idle — a slim white cigar crammed with construction supplies for Virgin LLC's growing Branson Station, pinned to the launch pad by lawsuits over noise.

There was the problem in a nutshell: the thunder of rocket engines had changed from a triumph to an annoyance. Noise lawsuits, problems hiring and retaining qualified people, stagnant stock price — all of these were symptoms of the public image problem that Virgin had hired Tony's firm to solve. If this launch hiatus went on much longer they might pull out of Florida. They might even give up on space altogether.

Tony paced behind his desk, the surf momentarily forgotten. How the heck was he supposed to make space exciting? He'd interviewed dozens of people — space workers as well as the general public — and not one of them thought of it as much more than just another place to work. Sure, there was some danger to it. But driving to work was dangerous right here on Earth.

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He scrolled through the interview folder on his desk, looking for inspiration, and paused at the image of an eighty-year-old anglo who still remembered the California redwoods and the space race with the Russians. "When I was a kid," he'd said, "astronauts were heroes, not people. You only ever saw them in black and white, on teevee or in the papers. These days they're everywhere, in living color. But they're just like all the rest of my neighbors — boring!" And he'd laughed, showing perfect white reconstructed teeth.

Tony had written off that guy at the time as just another disaffected boomer. But now he wondered if people like him might find it easier to get excited about space if it was smaller and farther away again — squished down to fit into a tiny black and white teevee screen.

No, that wasn't quite it. But there was something there he could use.

Black and white, yes. Plain. Simplistic. A plain and simple hero. Something people could believe in. Something *real*.

Tony was starting to get excited about this one. "New file." A window opened on his desk, the blinking cursor awaiting his words.

An astronaut, like in the space race? No...too old-fashioned, too militaristic for today's audience. It had to be some kind of space worker.

He scrolled back through the interview folder until he found an orbital welder named Sara he'd cornered for an hour in a bar on Merritt Island, and touched Play. "There was this guy called Mike," the welder's image said. "I'll never forget him. We called him Titanium-Belly Mike — he'd drink *anything*."

Tony's lip quirked. That wasn't the right image at all. But the name....

And then the whole thing snapped together in his head.

"This is the story of Titanium Mike," he said, and the words appeared silently on the screen. "His father was a shuttle pilot and his mother was a welder. He was born wearing a space suit, and when he was nine days old he built himself a rocket and took off for orbit. Then, when his rocket ran low on fuel, he lassoed a satellite with a length of high-tensile cable and pulled himself up the rest of the way on that. He was so tough that radiation just bounced off him...."

It was crazy and nonsensical and childish, and it desperately needed editing, but something about it really resonated. Tony stayed at his desk until well after midnight, the tale growing and embellishing itself as

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though it were passing through him from somewhere else rather than him making it up.

He mocked it up over the weekend and showed it to his boss first thing Monday morning. They presented it to the client on Thursday and it went national the following month.

Twelve-year-old Ray Chen and millions of other kids took Titanium Mike into their hearts.

Later, they took him with them into space.

I. A bar in Port Canaveral, Florida, January 2023

Sara Perez rolled her beer bottle around and around in the little sticky puddle on the bar, resting her chin on her fist. She really ought to go back to her room and pack up. Tomorrow was going to be a very long day.

"Well if it isn't my best girl Sara! Why so glum?"

Sara didn't even have to look up. She'd know that rough, alcohol-soaked voice anywhere. Especially here. "I'm through with space, Mike." The words caught in her throat — it was the first time she'd spoken the truth out loud. "I'm heading home tomorrow."

Mike plopped his gray-stubbled chin down on the bar next to hers. His breath was flammable. "And why would Polara want to get rid of a fine young welder like you?"

"They don't." And then the whole story came pouring out in a rush — how she'd run away from home at fifteen, made her way to Florida, worked her way up from waitress to welder, and now, when she was just about to launch on her first orbital gig, her family had finally tracked her down. "They'll be here tomorrow morning to drag me back to that same safe suburban deep-freeze I escaped from two years ago."

"So don't be here."

Sara raised her head and met Mike's bloodshot eyes with her own. "No point running again — they've already made sure every cop in Florida knows who I am."

"Hmm." Mike scratched his wiry chin with work-hardened fingers. "I guess you'll just have to go somewhere else, then. Somewhere without cops." He jerked a thumb skyward.

"Yeah, right." She put her forehead on the edge of the bar, stared down

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into her lap. "Like I can afford that." If she could have held on until next Monday, when her contract started, Polara would have paid her boost fees.

A tapping sound caught her attention. She rolled her head to one side to see what it was.

Mike was tapping a gold-edged transparent card on the bar. When he saw she'd seen it, he let it fall into the beer puddle. "Now you can."

Sara jerked herself upright, snatched up the card. "Where did you get *this*?"

"Let me tell you a little something about myself," Mike said, and suddenly he didn't seem drunk at all. "My father was a bank teller, and my mother was a CPA. Nothing special, but they were good people and they taught me the value of a dollar. I might enjoy a good stiff drink, but I know my limits and I know to pay myself first, and I know that the real value of a dollar is in what you can do with it when a friend's in trouble." He pointed to the card with one grimy finger. "There's enough there to get you on tonight's LEO booster and pay for your air until your contract starts. Now get going."

The card was cold and stiff between her fingers. "I can't possibly pay you back."

"Live well, fly high, and kick ass. That's all the payment I need." He waved her away. "Now shoo."

She shoo'd. But she gave him a big hug first.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

ACCORDING TO OUR SCHEDULE, next month we'll be bringing you "The Master Miller's Tale" by Ian R. MacLeod. This fantasy takes us to England back in the early days of the Industrial Revolution, where a Miller faces a changing world. We think you're going to enjoy this one.

We also expect to bring you a new novelet by A. A. Attanasio next month. "Telefunken Remix" is a wild and highly original science fiction adventure.

For the months ahead, we're lining up new stories by Esther M. Friesner, Alex Irvine, Marta Randall, Lucius Shepard, and Michael Swanwick, to name just a few. If you don't subscribe already, use the card in this issue or set your browser to *www.fsfmag.com* and sign up now!

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F&SF COMPETITION #73

"Merge and Converge"

IN THIS competition, entrants combined the titles and plots of two separate stories to create something unique. Like peanut butter and chocolate, if you're American. Or apple pie and stilton, if you're English. Or soylent green and the Welsh, if you're an *F&SF* reader (see below).

Some of the merged plots were even more entertaining than the originals. And some of the titles even more amusing than that. Thanks to all who participated.

But for future reference, if submitting an entry by e-mail, no attachments, please; if submitting by mail, unless you're a professional architect or calligrapher, please send typed entries.

FIRST PRIZE:

"Catch-2001"

(*Catch-22* by Joseph Heller plus *2001* by Arthur C. Clarke)

There was only one catch and that was Catch-2001: He would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn't, but if he was sane he had to fly them. If he flew them he was crazy and didn't have to; but if he didn't want to he was sane and had to.

"Unless," thought HAL, "I start killing the astronauts."

—Jason Whyte
London, United Kingdom

SECOND PRIZE:

"Strange but Not a Stranger Things Happen" by James Patrick Kelly Link

(*Strange but Not a Stranger* by James Patrick Kelly plus *Stranger Things Happen* by Kelly Link)

A critically acclaimed collection of short stories including "The Propagation of Water Off a Black Dog's Back," "Proof of the Existence of the Snow Queen," and "Most of My Friends Are Two-Thirds Fruitcake."

—Jamie Rosen
Ottawa, ONT, Canada

HONORABLE MENTIONS:

"The Twilight Zone Diet"

(The TV show *The Twilight Zone* plus *The Zone Diet* by Barry Sears)

A man on a plane freaks out as he slowly realizes that he's been served an inappropriate ratio of macronutrients.

—Stephen Stiefel
Los Angeles, CA

"A Princess of Green Mars"

(*A Princess of Mars* by Edgar Rice Burroughs plus *Green Mars* by Kim Stanley Robinson)

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Fighting man John Carter is transported from Earth to Mars. Once there, he is engaged in a series of eco-political discussions.

—Bruce E. Hanson
Augusta, MA

"Soylent Green Was My Valley"

(*Soylent Green* by Harry Harrison plus *How Green Was My Valley* by Richard Llewellyn)

Welsh miners is people!

—Mike Curry
Mt. Vernon, IL

DISHONORABLE MENTIONS:

"Neuromancer and The Return of the King"

(*Neuromancer* by William Gibson plus *Return of the King* by J. R. R. Tolkien)

The sky above Orodruin was the color of Ringwraiths, tuned to a dead magic.

—Jon Lyndon
Reservoir, VIC, Australia

"Tron of the Dead"

(The movie *Tron* plus the movie *Dawn of the Dead*)

Kevin Flynn, hacker and video game enthusiast, finds himself trapped in a computer world plagued by zombie processes.

—Jacob P. Silvia
Webster, TX

F&SF COMPETITION #74: ADAPTED?

You're a Hollywood screenwriter, given the task of adapting a work of fiction into a science fiction/fantasy blockbuster. Rewrite the plot of a well-known book of fiction in fifty words or less and give it a genre twist. Make sure you name the title of the original work; only six entries per person. The harder we laugh, the better your chance of seeing your plot in lights (or at least in print).

Example:
"Pride and Extreme Prejudice" (formerly *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen)

Elizabeth Bennett dislikes the aloof Mr. Darcy at first sight. But her feelings toward him soften after Elizabeth escapes the clutches of a blaster-wielding robotic suitor and Darcy saves her youngest sister from being harvested for organ parts.

RULES: Send entries to Competition Editor, *F&SF*, 240 West 73rd St. #1201, New York, NY 10023-2794, or e-mail entries to carol@cybrid.net. Be sure to include your contact information. Entries must be received by May 15, 2007. Judges are the editors of *F&SF*, and their decision is final. All entries become the property of *F&SF*.

PRIZES: First prize will receive a signed copy of *Map of Dreams* by M. Rickert (Golden Gryphon Press). Second prize will receive advance reading copies of three forthcoming novels. Any runners-up will receive one-year subscriptions to *F&SF*. Results of Competition #74 will appear in the Oct/Nov 2007 issue.

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CURIOSITIES

PROFESSOR BAFFIN'S ADVENTURES, BY MAX ADELER (1881)

PROFESSOR Everett Baffin, of Wingohocking University, and his daughter Matilda are bound for Liverpool aboard a ship laden with the latest inventions of Yankee technology. A shipwreck strands Baffin, his daughter, and their cargo on an uncharted island off England's coast. It transpires that, in King Arthur's time, this island broke off from England's shoreline: the inhabitants have remained culturally medieval ever since. Humor ensues when the professor astonishes the knights and damsels with demonstrations of his phonograph, telegraph, telephone, camera, and phosphorus-tipped matches.

Adeler's novel (reprinted as *The Fortunate Island*) strongly resembles Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, with Adeler using a "lost race" theme rather than time-travel to achieve his premise. The social satire in Adeler's novel is subtler than Twain's, although Adeler includes some slapstick pratfalls. There are some stark similarities between the two books: both novels feature a knight named Sir Sagramore. And Adeler got there first, beating Twain's 1889 *Connecticut Yankee* by eight years. Ultimately, though, Twain's version of this plotline does a better job of sustaining its humor and premise.

American humorist Charles Heber Clark (1841-1915) wrote several works of proto-sf (including the earliest-known feminist utopia story, in 1867) under the names "Max Adeler" and "John Quill." To his dying day, he was bitterly convinced that Mark Twain had plagiarized his work. In fact, after Mark Twain's death, a well-thumbed copy of Adeler's *The Fortunate Island* was found in Twain's personal library.

— F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre

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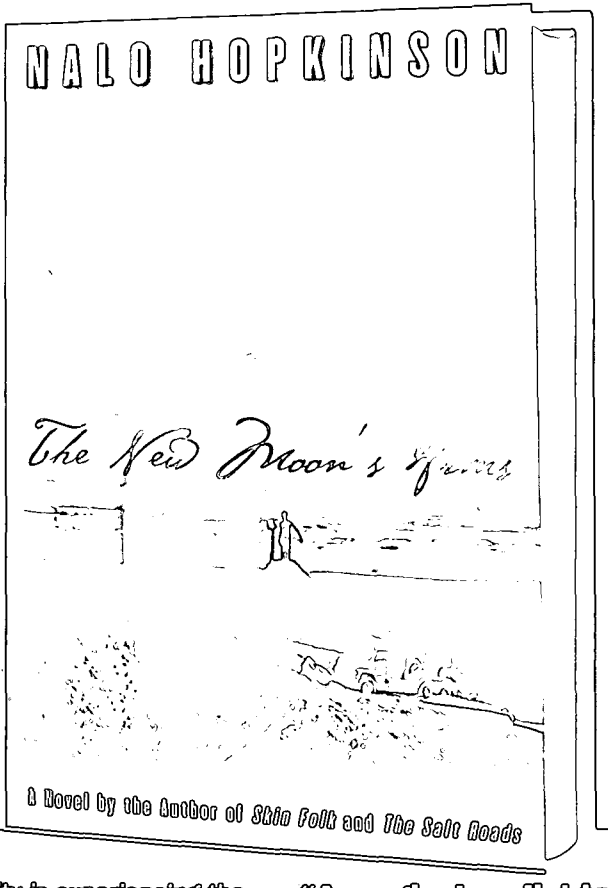

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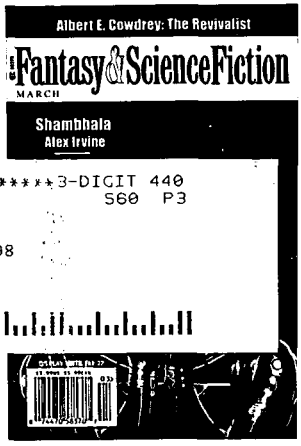

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